

Transcript of BBC Radio 4, 'Today', 1 March, Interview with Tony Blair, 7.32am

SARAH MONTAGUE: Well, Tony Blair is in Brussels today, the former Prime Minister, urging European leaders to help stop Brexit by promising to change the rules on immigration. The request for concessions comes a day after the EU horrified many here in Belfast and in London by publishing draft proposals that Northern Ireland remain in the customs union to avoid a hard border - effectively moving it to along the Irish Sea. Well, the British government has reacted in fury, it's ruled out the idea. Well, Tony Blair joins us from Brussels. Mr Blair, of course you were so instrumental, so involved in the Good Friday Agreement that led to the, effectively, to the removal of the border - given what you're hearing now about the options for its replacement what are your thoughts?

TONY BLAIR: Er, my thoughts are that there is no way round the essential dilemma which is just being expressed in Northern Ireland but actually you could take across the whole of the Brexit negotiation, and that central dilemma is as follows: you, you either want a frictionless border and easy trade between the UK and the EU, in which case you will have to stay in the single market and the customs union or, alternatively, if you come out of those because you want the freedom to set your own rules and regulations, you're going to have a hard border. And this, this dilemma, which is the central dilemma in the negotiation and has not yet been resolved by the government, this dilemma is making its appearance in this context in Northern Ireland but actually it's at the heart of the whole problem with the negotiation. And in the end there is a very stark choice: you either leave the single market and customs union and forge a different economic future, having the freedom to diverge on regulation but doing significant economic damage to the country in the short and medium term at least, or, alternatively, you're part of the single market and customs union, you don't have a hard border but then of course you become a rule taker and not a rule maker.

SM: Do you fear, even if they do come up with some technological solution to along that border that, you know, people think, 'Well, okay, let's try this out', that there is a risk to peace as a result of this change?

TB: Well, myself and John Major went to Northern Ireland in the course of the referendum specifically on this issue and what we warned of was, by the way, precisely the problem that we have today and the reason we did so is because part of the whole basis of the Good Friday Agreement or the Belfast Agreement as others call it, is that there is a recognition of nationalist aspirations in return for the principle of consent, namely that Northern Ireland stays part of the United Kingdom as long as the majority of people in Northern Ireland wanted to do so now. Now, part of that recognition of nationalist aspiration was of course because Britain and . . . erm, er the Republic of Ireland were both in the European Union, was that the open border should allow freedom of movement of people, freedom of movement of goods and therefore it was very easy for people in Northern Ireland still to feel attached to the South even though they remain within the United Kingdom.

SM: Indeed. But what we have now as well, of course, are various people including the Labour MP Kate Hoey and others suggesting that the Good Friday Agreement itself, because the Stormont Assembly is . . . is suspended at the moment, in stasis, that the Good Friday Agreement itself needs to be revisited and adapted?

TB: I, I . . . I find it . . . erm, I mean . . . not just disappointing, but, but, I mean, I've used the word and use it now – sickening – that people should . . . should really be prepared to sacrifice the peace in Northern Ireland on the altar of Brexit. I mean, the fact of the matter is those of us who grew up at the time of the Troubles remember what it was like. I was explaining this to some young people the other day who, you know, obviously and . . . and thankfully have not grown up with this, that every day the news on your programme would be dominated by news of acts of terrorism, death, division, destruction from . . . from Northern Ireland. Now, for all its challenges the Good Friday Agreement has given us, relatively, two decades of peace. Now we need to preserve it, we need to build on it, but to suggest that we should get rid of the Good Friday Agreement because it prevents us doing this hard Brexit is, I think . . .

SM: *(fragment of word, or word unclear, speaking over, 'No'?)*

TB: . . . it really is quite extraordinary.

SM: But the suggestion is different, the suggestion is that it should be adapted and adapted for . . . you know, it's served its purpose for 20 years, but now you have a situation where it's not necessarily . . . in the way that it works, in the formats of power sharing insists on, ensuring best governance?

TB: Yeah and sure, you know, like any agreement there will be things that you can change and adapt and, and may have to adapt over time and the Good Friday Agreement always, by the way, foresaw that – that there would be changes and adjustments over a period of time. But that's all in the context of what is good for Northern Ireland and the people of Northern Ireland. The problem is this is arising in the context of the Brexit debate and you know, just to make this point: it's not people like myself that have created this problem over the Northern Ireland border. Essentially since the beginning of the Republic of Ireland almost 100 years ago the Republic of Ireland and the UK have always been in the same relationship to the European Union. So for many years we were both out of the European Union and then the Republic of Ireland and the UK joined the European Union on the same day in 1973. The reason why this is a problem is that for the first time the Republic is going to be in a different position in its relationship to Europe than the UK.

SM: Indeed. Let's move on to what you are going to be saying in Brussels today, because you basically seem to be saying, 'Look, give concessions' - is it realistic to think that Brussels might be prepared to give up on one of the four freedoms, that freedom of movement and allow some controls on immigration to stop Brexit?

TB: We they don't have to give up on the freedom of movement, but we have to recognise that the concern about immigration is not limited to Britain. And really what I'm doing today is saying that there are essentially three legs to the stool of changing Brexit. The first is that the British people start to understand this is a very costly and complex process, much more so than we realised. Now, I think that's well on the way to being satisfied. Secondly, I think we have to show people who voted Leave there are different ways of dealing with their anxieties and better ways than Brexit. But the third thing is to say to Europe it's also bad for you. You know, Brexit may be bad for Britain, it's bad for Europe, it's going to diminish Europe, it's going to weaken it, it's going to weaken it by taking out one of the major economies of Europe from the European Union and it's going to weaken it politically . . .

SM: Indeed.

TB: Europe will be less influential in the world. So if the price . . . if, if it looks like Britain is prepared to change its mind, then if the price of that is Europe also putting forward changes and reforms which, by the way, would have widespread support across Europe . . .

SM: (*speaking over*) And have you had . . .

TB: . . . then that is something that Europe should do.

SM: Okay, so have you had any indications from Brussels that people would be prepared to consider that?

TB: I think they would be prepared to consider it, yes, because actually there are . . .

SM: (*speaking over*) What have you been told?

TB: . . . huge debates . . . well, I think, first of all there are big debates going on in Europe now about reform. If you see what President Macron has been saying in the past few months, he's set forward a whole series of changes and reforms in Europe which are absolutely necessary. And secondly, you know, if you look at what's happening in the politics of Europe, all over Europe, and the most recent Eurobarometer, which is a poll of European opinion, Europe-wide, shows you what the issues are for European people and immigration is the number one issue . . .

SM: (*interrupting*) Sure, but that was the case when David Cameron tried to do this before the referendum and he didn't get anywhere.

TB: Sure, but you know, that's then and now's now, and frankly . . .

SM: (*interrupting*) Have you had serious conversations with senior Brussels figures who've said yes we would entertain that?

TB: I mean, I'm not going to go into exactly who I've spoken to, but I can assure you I'm not saying this on the basis just of a kind of whim. Erm, I think about most people . . . people will not get rid of the freedom of movement principle, by the way, and neither should they, because in the end that's for the advantage of the European Union, but you know, for example, I was talking to a Belgian politician here in Brussels yesterday, who explained to me all the things that Belgium do in order to restrict European immigration, to the very specific circumstances allowed by freedom of movement and not more than that. I mean, the truth is there are many things that Britain could do even within the existing system to tighten it, if we wanted to prioritise tightening immigration over bringing people in to do tasks in the British economy. So I think there are changes that Europe would make to its own external border system as well, there's a big debate going on about that now because they realise they've got huge problems with their borders, so all I'm saying is one part of this debate should be about, not just about how British politicians have a responsibility to find a way out of this impasse, but also how European politicians have a shared responsibility.

SM: You are, of course, not the only former Prime Minister speaking out on this, we had John Major as well yesterday, now, you know . . . you will know from (*fragments of words, unclear*) experience over the years what it's like when former senior politicians speak out. It

puts the Prime Minister in a very difficult position. If you weaken Theresa May, the possible outcome is that you get to Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister. Is that something that you are aware of and thinking of and looking forward to?

TB: Erm, well, first of all on John Major's speech, I really think people should read it and study it, because it's heartfelt, but very analytical as to what the problems are. And neither he nor I want to make her position difficult. This has gone far beyond that. The problem that she has is that there is no way round the dilemma. What she thinks is, is that it's possible to get the Europeans to give us access to Europe's markets without the same obligations that the rest of Europe has in the single market. That is not possible. It's not a question of a tough negotiation or a week negotiation, it literally is not going to happen. So the dilemma that you have is you're either going to have to stay close to Europe to minimise economic damage, in which case you abide by Europe's rules, or . . .

SM: *(speaking over)* But . . .

TB: . . . you're free from Europe's rules . . .

SM: Indeed, indeed . . .

TB: . . . in which case you're going to have economic damage.

SM: But my question was about the political consequences of this process. And . . .

TB: Yes, and Jeremy Corbyn and would this lead to Jeremy Corbyn, but look, in the end . . .

SM: *(speaking over)* And how you feel about that, I mean have you . . . particularly given the announcement on Monday that Labour's now in favour of staying in a customs union, whether you think, 'Great, let's bring it on?'

TB: Well, I think the Labour Party shift is sensible, although frankly I think they will . . . very soon find that we've got to move further in order to escape the dilemma ourselves. But look, in the end this is . . . this is about the interests of the country, and . . . this is the most important decision, I think everyone agrees, this is the most important decision this country has taken since the Second World War. In those circumstances, if you believe passionately, and I do, and I think from his speech yesterday John Major does, that there is a different and better way forward for our country at this time, you know, I think you've got to . . . well, at least, I feel there's a sense of obligation to, to speak up, and it's to make her position difficult, both of us know how hard it is to be Prime Minister, but the fact is we've waited for a year for the government to advance its negotiating position, and the real lesson out of what has happened yesterday with the publication of the European guidelines is that we're no further forward a year on . . .

SM: *(speaking over)* Tony Blair . . .

TB: No, in a year's time, we're going to be out of the European Union, unless we take avoiding action now, which we should.

SM: Tony Blair, thank you.