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## **BLAIR URGES PRO-EU BRITONS TO 'RISE UP' AGAINST BREXIT**

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Former British prime minister Tony Blair on Friday (17 February) urged Britons who support the European Union to rise up and persuade Brexit voters to change their mind about leaving the bloc in a high-profile speech.

This is not the time for retreat, indifference or despair but the time to rise up in defence of what we believe, he said at an event organised by Open Britain, a campaign group lobbying for Britain to retain close ties with the EU.

I don't know if we can succeed. But I do know we will suffer a rancorous verdict from future generations if we do not try, he said.

We have to build a movement that will stretch across party lines, he said, announcing that he was creating an institute that would also develop arguments against Brexit and keep ties with the EU.

### **Criticism of Corbyn**

Blair also heavily criticised his successor as Labour leader, although not mentioning Jeremy Corbyn by name.

He told his audience: The debilitation of the Labour party is the facilitator of Brexit. I hate to say that but it is true.

Corbyn, who voted against remaining in the EU in the original 1975 referendum, was accused of running a lacklustre campaign to Remain at last year's referendum, then failing to oppose the government's Brexit bill in parliament earlier this month.

### **Blair in Brussels**

In the wake of the speech, EurActiv.com asked the Commission if Article 50 was reversible, if indeed the British do rise up against Brexit.

Deputy Chief Spokesman Alexander Winterstein, replied: We are where we are. We wait for the Article 50 letter to arrive and then there will be negotiating guidelines from the European Council. Discussion with the UK will start and the rest we will see.

Blair had been in Brussels in January for a private meeting with Commissioner Jean-Claude Juncker.

Asked if that meeting had touched on this topic, Winterstein merely said: It is not a secret that

former Prime Minister Blair came to see President Juncker as many other current and former leaders do on a continuous basis.

Former PM Blair and President Juncker have known each other for a long, long time. Its very normal that they have conversations from time to time.

UK's Brexit bill overcomes another hurdle

British MPs overwhelmingly backed a bill yesterday (8 February) empowering Prime Minister Theresa May to start negotiations on leaving the European Union, bringing Brexit a significant step closer.

Britain voted to leave the European Union last year and Prime Minister Theresa May has said she will trigger Article 50 of the EUs Lisbon Treaty by the end of March, starting a two-year exit process.

Experts are divided on whether the government could change its mind about leaving the EU at some point in the future, even after invoking Article 50.

Blair came to power in 1997 at the head of the moderate leftist New Labour movement and won three general elections but his role in leading Britain into the Iraq War has badly damaged his legacy.

Brexit supporters quickly criticised Blairs comments.

The EU referendum was democratic, fair and free and the British people voted for Brexit, said Richard Tice, co-chair of the Leave Means Leave group.

Tony Blair is now trying to do everything he can to halt Brexit, he said.

Former Conservative minister Iain Duncan Smith said the speech was arrogant and undemocratic.

Nigel Farage, former head of the UK Independence Party, tweeted: Tony Blair is yesterdays man.

In the speech, which was shown live in full on BBC and Sky News, Blair launched a stinging attack on government policy saying the EU departure process was being led by proponents of hard Brexit.

Our challenge is to expose relentlessly the actual cost, to show how this decision was based on imperfect knowledge, he said, adding: How hideously, in this debate, is the mantle of patriotism abused.

Blair also warned that Scotland, which voted overwhelmingly to stay in the EU, now had a much more credible case for independence.

He said Brexit could have a destabilising impact on Northern Ireland, which also voted to stay.

Blair made the speech at the offices of Bloomberg news agency, the same place where former prime minister David Cameron announced in January 2013 that Britain would hold an EU membership referendum.

Meanwhile, ahead of a meeting with French Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve in Downing Street on Friday, May wrote a lengthy opinion piece for Le Figaro, restating her position that the UK had voted to leave the EU, not Europe.

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