
REMAINDER TONY BLAIR SAYS 'SOFT' BREXIT IS NOT A SENSIBLE OPTION

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Speaking to Euronews, former UK prime minister Blair says hard Brexit or remaining in EU are the only workable options for Britain.

With divisions still appearing to run deep between the EU and Britain over Brexit, former prime minister Tony Blair has been in Brussels on what can be described as a Brexit intervention. He's hoping to change the course of Brexit, if not stop it altogether.

He spoke to Euronews' Tessa Arcilla.

The Brexit 'dilemma'

Euronews: "How effective do you think your Brexit interventions are, is it wishful thinking or is it based on something that you know that we don't?"

Tony Blair: "Well I think what we do know in Britain now is that this process of Brexit has turned out to be much more complex and costly than people thought, that there are many different versions of Brexit, and so as this debate proceeds what's increasingly clear in my view is that the government will find it hard to get a vote through Parliament on any form of Brexit, any one form.

"So they are going to have to choose between a Brexit that either keeps us close to Europe, but then they are going to have to abide by a lot of the rules in Europe, or they will break away from those rules, we will be free to follow our own rules but then we will lose our access to European markets and that will do us economic damage. And that dilemma, I call the dilemma of negotiations, that is much more apparent in Britain today and it is reshaping the debate."

A final say

Euronews: "Have we reached the point of no return?"

Tony Blair: "No, we reach the point of no return in March 2019 when we actually leave. But up until then, we have the ability to decide that we want to stay or that we want to go, but we've got the freedom to do either. But what people like myself are saying is because there are all these

different versions of Brexit, once the government proposes, and a firm proposition, then the people should have the final say on that, because we then have the chance to judge between what we have now in the European Union and what we will have under the government's proposals.

"Whereas back in June 2016 when we had the referendum, you know, all we could vote on was what we didn't like about Europe, but we didn't have another proposal to judge against."

Euronews: "But what are you calling for, when you say a second referendum, is it a Brexit yes or no, or is it a vote on the deal, so it is a Brexit but you'll vote on the terms. What are you calling for?"

Tony Blair: "The critical thing is: you can't re-run the referendum, but what you can do is to say that the British people will have the right to have the final say on the final deal. Because then that's not something that they have yet proclaimed. Parliament first of all is gotta consider it. Now I think Parliament will find it hard to reach an agreement. If they don't reach an agreement, then it's open to go back to the people and let the people make the final choice."

Liberal elites

Euronews: "Now you are a divisive figure. Do you think that your involvement in the Brexit debate is strengthening the resolve of the people who voted to leave saying these so called liberal elites are again here 'selling out our country.' Do you acknowledge the counter-productive impact that you may have on your goals?"

Tony Blair: "There is no one who enters this Brexit debate who is not controversial one way or another. And you know this idea that all the liberal elites are on the side of staying in Europe then the people are on the other side... 16 million people in Britain voted to remain, you know they are not elites. The people who control the right wing media in the UK are not exactly ordinary people in the street. So you've got elites on both sides, you've got ordinary people on both sides. The sensible thing is to conduct the debate on its merits."

The Irish issue

Euronews: "You have used the word 'sickening' in relation to Brexit and perhaps how some people would dismiss the concerns around the Northern Ireland border issue. The EU's draft withdrawal agreements says that one way to not have a hard border is to keep Northern Ireland in the Customs Union. Prime Minister Theresa May was furious. Surely you must be happy that at least Northern Ireland would not be part of Brexit in some way?"

Tony Blair: "You see the Northern Ireland problem is a matter for the problem for the whole negotiation. The truth of the matter is we can't have Northern Ireland in the Customs Union and the rest of the UK not in the Customs Union. I mean that then puts Northern Ireland in a different relationship to the UK. On the other hand, if you don't have Northern Ireland in the Customs Union there is going to be a hard border with the Republic of Ireland. In fact even if you have them in the Customs Union there is still going to be border problems."

"The only safe way to avoid those problems is to have Northern Ireland in the single market but

then you're gonna have to have Britain in the single market. So this is simply an example of what is the central dilemma. And that is that if you want to preserve the economics of Britain's position so that you're trading frictionlessly with the rest of Europe, you can only do that in the single market. And what the British government are trying to do with Europe is say we want this frictionless trade but we don't want to have to abide by the rules of the single market.

"Europe's never going to agree to that. So this is why we've hit this impasse and all of these issues, Northern Ireland being the most obvious, but it's one of many, have the same dilemma at the heart of it. You're either in Europe as market and therefore abiding by Europe's rules or if you want to break free of those rules you can do but then you're out of the market."

Single market

Euronews: "But basically what you're suggesting is because you said that this is not a question of whether there is a Brexit - there will be a Brexit, it's just a matter of the terms. But what you're saying is that, your suggestion is that the UK should be part of the single market, the Customs Union if I understand correctly. But this will mean the UK will abide by the rules but it cannot make decisions?"

Tony Blair: "Exactly, so this is then the next step of the argument. So if you decide that you want to stay with frictionless trade with Europe, you're gonna have to be in the single market. There is no other way of doing it. However, as you rightly say, once you're in the single market, in my view the British people will say ok then we might as well stay in then, because in the single market you abide by the rules, but we don't have a say in those rules.

"So all we've done with this Brexit is leave the room of decision making. That's why when you look at this there are really only two sensible options: a clean break Brexit, which will be very difficult, with a lot of economic pain, or alternatively, you stay in the reforming Europe. These are the two sensible options. I mean I don't regard hard Brexit as sensible, but these are the two workable options, let me put it this way."

Euronews: "I just want to have one more question on the Irish matter. Some have called the Good Friday Agreement in which you played a key role as unsustainable, that it should be changed or adapted. How do you feel about that and will we see a return to darker days?"

Tony Blair: "Well I am very angry about that because these people are raising this now in the context of Brexit. Let's be clear, the only reason they are saying the Good Friday Agreement no longer works or is unsustainable - of course you can change the Good Friday Agreement, if you want to amend it. But they are saying this now because anything that stays in the way of Brexit and the Good Friday Agreement as a complication for the Brexit people they are prepared to get rid off even if that means that the peace in Northern Ireland is put at risk.

"It is a totally irresponsible position. So what I am saying to people is: look, the whole basis of the Good Friday Agreement was that we accepted there should be freedom of movement for people and goods along the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. If you put that at risk you are undermining a central principle of that Good Friday Agreement and then if the response is well then get rid of the Good Friday Agreement, then I'm afraid that shows you the degree to which these people are prepared to prioritise Brexit over everything, including peace in

Northern Ireland."

Euronews: "So you are saying we could see a return to darker days?"

Tony Blair: "I hope not and I think even if we do Brexit, even if we do the hardest Brexit, we've all got to work to make sure that doesn't happen. You know, if we have to find a way through, then we have to find a way through. But it's not responsible to start talking about getting rid of the peace agreement in Northern Ireland as if it was neither here, nor there. It's been of huge consequence these last two decades to changing the whole situation in Northern Ireland so we really should just treat that situation with a lot of care and a lot of thought."

Reforming Europe

Euronews: "So you're here in Brussels, you're asking the EU for help to stop Brexit by reforming Europe. Now this is not new, these reforms have been talked about in Europe for years and this counts to me as a reform in the areas that the UK wants to see reforms. Again, the EU will say fine, we will have reforms, but UK, you cannot cherry pick. so we're back to square one, aren't we, to the same argument we've had before?"

Tony Blair: "I think you can identify very clearly reforms that Europeans are advocating Europe-wide. First of all on the issue of immigration. Britain is not the only country worried about immigration. You look at the elections just happening in Italy, look at Macron's recent reforms in France, you look at the German elections recently - immigration is a huge issue all over Europe. You look at what's happening in Hungary, in Poland.

"So I think Europe as a whole needs to deal with this immigration issue, not just Britain. But then there are other changes which are more to do with the future governments of Europe, where, again, Europe is already talking about these things, so you don't need to cherry-pick. There is a whole set of reforms that could be proposed for Europe in the interest of Europe but they will also include dealing with the anxieties of Britain, particularly around the issue of immigration, because those are anxieties felt by all European people, not just by British people."

Immigration

Euronews: "Well immigration, we can't lump everything just into one term. there is immigration from the outside of Europe and there is a freedom of movement. This is also something that the British people have a problem with, this freedom of movement within the European Union. So that is a sticking point..."

Tony Blair: "So here is what I think we could do and make a big difference. Absolutely as you say, there is immigration within the European Union and there is immigration coming in from outside Europe. Europe is already looking at how it's strengthening its external borders, it's got lot more to do that would have the full support of Britain. And then you have immigration within the European Union. Again, Britain's anxieties are the same as many people's. Now Britain could in fact apply the existing European rules in a tougher way if it wanted to.

"But also there may be a latitude that Europe is prepared to allow with the freedom of movement

principle that protects what uniquely British anxieties are about this, because of the very sudden influx of immigrants we got from Europe a short while ago. So my view is, you know, this a negotiation that you could do and could be successful. And it would satisfy Europe's anxieties and it would satisfy British anxieties. I am not saying it's easy, but given what's at stake in Brexit, it's worth trying to do."

Labour's Brexit

Euronews: "Labour is still your party, how aligned do you feel with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyns position and the partys position in its response to Brexit?"

Tony Blair: "Look I think the evolution of Labours position this week which has been to say we should definitely stay in a Customs Union is welcome, but I think Labour will find that in the end, its going to end up if its not careful with the worst of both worlds.

"The most sensible thing for the Labour party to do in my view is to go out to its own people who voted leave and to say this isnt the way to deal with your problems, heres a better way to deal with your problems and by the way because of this Brexit issue the governments not dealing with the National Health Service, its not dealing with economies in the regions that are left behind, its not dealing with the absence of opportunities for young people. Here are better ways of dealing with these problems. I think if Labour did that it would win massive support."

Euronews: "Should we be drawing political lines along the Brexit debate? You have Labour remainers, Tory remainers, create a new party?"

Tony Blair: "I dont think anyone wants to create a new party."

Euronews: "An alliance?"

Tony Blair: "Well I think there is an alliance now and I think there are Labour people working hard in Parliament with their Conservative colleagues to put the country first and that alliance I think is definitely happening and should happen more."

The Syria conflict

Euronews: "I would like to get one question in on Syria, there are reports of chemical weapons used in Syria, the government denies this - now what should the UK be doing Is this perceived lack of the international community sorting this problem out a result of the fallout from the Iraq days, Iraq war?"

Tony Blair: "Look, Syria is and has been a huge tragedy since 2011 and I have said on many many occasions that we should have handled this issue completely differently throughout because what we should have done from the very beginning is precisely because of the experience we have gone through in Afghanistan and Iraq. We should have realised the problem is always when you remove the dictatorial regime what then comes afterwards.

"Now I think it would have been possible at an early stage of this crisis to have agreed a process of transition, we didnt, we said Assad had to go, but we didnt go and get him out and then he

brought in Iran and Hezbollah and was able to secure his position. Were now in a situation where frankly the suffering of people in Syria is an outrage internationally and my view is my own country and all countries should be doing all they can to bring it to an end and to create a process of political transition where the Syrian people can in the end choose their own government but we are a long way from that."

Euronews: "Would that be to intervene?"

Tony Blair: "Well this would be a whole new interview if we wanted to go through those things in detail but it's a tragedy which in my view should never have been allowed to happen."

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