

Tony Blair: Devolution, Brexit and the future of the Union



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Biographical details

Parliamentary history

1983–2007: Labour MP for Sedgefield

Government career

1997–2007: Prime Minister

Tony Blair was interviewed by Bronwen Maddox, Sam Macrory and Akash Paun on 24 April.

Tony Blair reflects on two decades of devolution, the threat that Brexit poses to the Union – and sets out what he believes must be done to heal the United Kingdom’s divisions.

Bronwen Maddox (BM): Let’s jump back 20 years. What did you see as the purpose of devolution?

Tony Blair (TB): The purpose of devolution was to bring about a new settlement between the constituent parts of the UK so that decision making was brought closer to the people who felt a strong sense of identity. And politically, also, to ward off the bigger threat of secession.

BM: And that was why you put it in the manifesto back at that point [1997]?

TB: Yes. I mean, it was the established Labour Party position but, essentially, I took the view that it was right in principle and necessary politically. And before I became Labour leader it was clear that was the pretty established and settled position of the Labour Party. So frankly, it would have been hard to change it even if I had wanted to, but I had become convinced myself that it was basically the right thing to do and that the previous 100 years had been a series of failed attempts to do devolution. And it was important that we succeeded otherwise I could see a situation, particularly in Scotland, where the support for independence would be unstoppable. And I still think it was basically necessary to prevent that even though it’s a continuing debate as to whether Scotland goes for full independence or not.

BM: Let’s jump forward 20 years. How does that look?

TB: Well, we’re still the UK and we’re still together so you’ve got to put a tick there. Are there still pressures for secession? Well, in Scotland, yes, but I still think they won’t succeed unless Brexit pushes us into a position where that kind of gets Scottish independence over the line – if you have hard Brexit, which is possible. And in Northern Ireland, without Brexit I would be very confident that the Union would stick together but again Brexit is an issue there. I don’t think there is a strong move for independence in Wales, but...

BM: Northern Ireland hasn’t had a government for more than two years. What does that say about whether that settlement is working?

TB: There’s nothing wrong with the basic settlement but it always requires intensive working on by the Government and there’s just not the bandwidth in government to do that at the moment. There’s just not the bandwidth to do anything other than Brexit. So yes, it’s very unfortunate. I still think, however, that once we get through, and hopefully out of, this Brexit imbroglio we can return to normal government there because it’s important.

BM: What is the cost of not having government in Northern Ireland?

TB: The cost of not having a government in Northern Ireland is very simple. It looks like the devolution settlement isn't working. So you then immediately become at risk of the politics being polarised between the extremes again. The Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent 10 years of negotiations and the final settlement with Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness in government was an enormous thing to do and it basically worked. And now it's broken down over these last few years and you've got to put it back together again. I mean, it can be put back together again but it requires intensive work and people constantly underestimate... the time that we spent on Northern Ireland was immense. I don't know if you've totted up the number of visits I made to Northern Ireland against previous Prime Ministers all the way back to the creation of the Irish Republic... probably I went more times than all the rest of them put together. I don't know – I've never done the calculations. But probably. It was intense. They weren't, you know, glad-handing visits, they were visits that had me deep in negotiations. Because showing that you really care about it is an important part of solving it, funnily enough.

BM: And if there began to be support for a border poll would you see that as a failure of devolution or the evolution of the community there?

TB: I don't think there will be real pressure for a border poll except for Brexit. It's Brexit that is the new dimension, I'm afraid. There's no escaping that. The thing that I find truly weird is the degree to which the most ardent unionist, Conservative MPs seem to be those most insistent on a Brexit deal that would put the Union at risk. It's an extraordinary thing. Because they want a hard Brexit, which means a hard border and, you know, you can mitigate but you can't eliminate it. That's the thing that will immediately stimulate the mood within the nationalist community. Not the republican community. The republican community in Northern Ireland is always in favour of a united Ireland...but the nationalist community is in favour at a theoretical level, at a conceptual level, but the degree of their agitation for it is intimately connected with their perception as to whether they can achieve nationalist aspirations and the legitimatisation of nationalist feelings within the United Kingdom. If Brexit acts as a destructive force on that, then it will encourage within the nationalist community, and even within parts of the more liberal unionist community, a feeling towards a border poll that just wasn't present during the years that I was in office.

BM: Let's go back to the successes and failures of devolution overall. Some of the cases against would be that it's very expensive, it produces not always the first rank of politicians, and it produces a slate of policies that don't get well tested before they get voted on.

TB: Yes, but, you know, in the end... the people in Wales and Scotland have got the right to elect who they want to elect. By the way, 20 years is not long in a new constitutional settlement. I don't think we can judge devolution properly... probably for many decades. Over time, what will happen is that parties adjust and one of the things that I

always thought would happen with devolution is that it would mean, particularly on things like public services, whereas, you know, the New Labour Government in Westminster was pushing very hard on reform – education, healthcare, criminal justice, tuition fees – the devolved administration in Scotland had the freedom not to do that, and by and large hasn't. Likewise, where they've got devolved power in Wales. In the end, there will be a market for people who are politicians who are stepping forward and being in favour of reform. The most interesting development in Scotland has been the decline of the Labour Party and the resurgence of the Conservative Party. Now, in my view that has been very simply because the Conservatives have spotted a gap in the market that Labour have left – pro-union, pro-reform...

BM: Pro-reform of public services?

TB: Yes. A weakness in the SNP's position and a weakness in Labour's position. And therefore you've literally got a situation where the leader of the Conservative Party in Scotland has brought the party into what, roughly, second place in the polls.

BM: A weakness in the SNP's position because of public services?

TB: Because of public services and because, obviously, they're pro-independence and there's not clearly a majority for that in Scotland. Once you've got into a political competition, these things, over time, start to move. You know, what would be interesting in Northern Ireland is if you ever got to a situation where people stepped forward and fought for election just on the basis of delivery. You might. It's, at the moment, still very much concerned with your positions around a united Ireland or not, but you never know. You've just got to accept with devolution, it's a political market that can take a different turn, and that's probably a good thing.

BM: As you said, we bring Brexit into the picture. Can the Union survive Brexit?

TB: It can survive Brexit but we're underestimating the struggle, I think. I still think it's possible for us to escape Brexit. But if you do it and you do a hard Brexit... I think if this thing is properly dealt with in Parliament, which it hasn't been up to now, it will become very clear to people that actually the choice is stay or hard Brexit. Because the soft Brexit comes from a perfectly sensible space where people want to compromise over Brexit, but it just doesn't work, in my view, ultimately, for the public. And if you do end up with a hard Brexit, if you finally do Brexit and you do a hard Brexit, which is obviously what a large part of the Conservative Party want and what people who voted Brexit probably prefer (it's not clear, but they probably do) then, yes, it will put a strain on the Union. Now, we can overcome it, but you're going to have to work very hard to do it.

Sam Macrory (SM): So if Brexit happens, it will be very hard to resist demands for a second referendum on Scottish independence? The facts will have changed...

TB: Yes, the facts will have changed. I still think we should be very careful doing it unless it's clear that there's a huge groundswell for it. You know, one of things that Brexit has taught us is the danger of playing around with referendums in our country. These are big decisions which alter the whole nature of the country. One of the things that we've

really got to rediscover after Brexit is out of the way is what makes us the UK, because we really have divided, I think. I'm quite shocked by the amount of people who are Brexiteers in England who, when you put to them that it could cause a strain on the Union, just kind of shrug their shoulders and say, 'well, we don't care'. I mean, it's just really shocking, actually. Because that's just profoundly ignorant of our history, what's brought us to here and the way the world is changing outside the UK.

SM: If there were a second vote and different parts of the Union vote in different ways again – England could still vote to leave but the final result could be Remain– isn't there still a risk that the results of a second vote won't unite the Union?

TB: Yes. I mean look, what I say to people now about the Brexit thing is there is no ideal way. If you are looking for the ideal way out of this mess, it doesn't exist. It's what's the least worst option? The least worst option, in my view, is that you stay in the end because anything else is going to be difficult, and difficult for the Union. But I completely agree, yes, there's risks at every corner of this. I personally think that if we leave now without going back to the people there's going to be a lot of angst and anger on the Remain side of the line. What I keep trying to tell people is there is no compromise on Brexit that is going to heal the divisions. There may be a process around Brexit that can heal the divisions because people think the ultimate decision is fairly reached, but the reason why I think the Brexit compromise, a soft Brexit, doesn't work is in the end it's not, you know... If you're going to do Brexit the only point in doing it is if you're literally breaking free of European regulation. If that's your thing, and if you think it's the thing that undermines the sovereignty of the country, then you have greater freedom. That's the case of the Brexiteers.

But what is without any point at all is sticking to the trading systems of the EU and then leaving the political structures – i.e soft Brexit. So that's why I think you can set out a process around Brexit which I think has to be a very deliberative decision which should be gripped by the Government now. Right now, the obvious thing for the Government to do is to grip this process back from Parliament, set out a process with a proper structured interaction with hard Brexit people, soft Brexit people, Remain people, so that you get the options. You probably should set it out almost in a kind of white paper form for Parliament. And you get Parliament to come to a reasoned decision in June or July on what form of Brexit they want. That's what you've got to do. You've got to force members of Parliament to take an actual decision.

The whole weakness of the process up to now is that it hasn't really done that. The series of indicative votes sprung up by different roving coalitions of backbench MPs but this is not a satisfactory way to take a decision like this. Government has got to grip it and set up a proper process. And if you do that, I think you will end up with a decision that people consider is fairly reached, even if they don't agree with it. Whereas if you tumble out now with people believing the whole thing is a huge mess where no proper decision-making process has been engaged with, or you suddenly just revoke Brexit, you're going to cause terrible problems. Or you go for a sort of botched Brexit compromise which is her [Theresa May's] deal or a soft Brexit, and I think people will

just think ‘what have we done this for?’ This is why there is no way out of this now other than through a process.

SM: Another way out could be an election? If that were to happen, should Jeremy Corbyn be open to working with the SNP?

TB: I think an election is a really bad idea right now. I think an election is a bad idea around Brexit. Look, I know politics is mad nowadays, and there is a section of the Conservative Party that is kind of right-wing Trotskyists, so if you’re of that persuasion you might think a general election for the Conservative Party in the shadow of Brexit is a good idea. But on the assumption that you’re in full possession of your faculties, you know, why would you as the Conservative Party, that might consider yourself on quite strong ground against the Labour Party on everything other than Brexit, risk an election which is literally going to be a rerun of your problem in June 2017, when if you were against Brexit you were pushed towards voting Labour to make sure the Tories didn’t have a majority. For me, for the Tories willingly to impose a general election from their perspective is extraordinary. But in any event, I think there is a very good reason in principle for not having an election. It is a *sui generis* issue, Brexit. It’s decided on its own merits. If you want to test opinion, test it on Brexit.

BM: You mean in a second referendum?

TB: Yes.

BM: And you think that would solve the issue?

TB: I think if it came out of a process. My point is very simple. The way this has been handled by the Government up to now has been trying to get a bespoke Brexit deal that is somewhere between soft and hard and kind of unites the country – ‘We’ve done Brexit but we’ve done it in a way that sort of nods in the direction of the Remainers’. In my view, this has always been a futile exercise because on the future relationship with Europe, it is not really a negotiation – it’s a choice. And the choice was set out by Europe right at the outset and they’ve never changed and there’s no reason to change because it is a choice.

You’re either in the Single Market, or the Customs Union, or you’re out of them. If you’re out of them, you’re in the position of Canada and have a free trade agreement like a normal third party which, you know, can be a reasonable free trade agreement, but is nothing like the preferential trading system of the Single Market or indeed a customs union. Or you can be in the Single Market or Customs Union, which is like Norway – or Turkey if you’re in the Customs Union. So these are the options.

Part of the trouble that has happened for the public is that the public has just been told that Parliament is standing in the way of Brexit. And it has suited the Prime Minister for a long period of time to play on this in order to bounce her deal through Parliament in order to mobilise public opinion supposedly against an obstructive Parliament stopping the will of the people. But what that has done, is it has said to the public, ‘Look, Brexit is

just there to be done but, you know, these members of Parliament don't want to do it.' Which is absolutely the opposite of the case.

The truth is there are different varieties of Brexit and you have to choose one. And when you choose one it then becomes apparent what your problem is. Because your problem is there is a downside to whatever option you choose. And my point is very simple: you won't ever get to another referendum unless it's clear to Parliament that they don't want to take responsibility fully for the Brexit choice. If you force them to make that choice... I think they will say, 'OK, this is what I think but you have the final say'.

Because whatever choice you make... if you become like Norway it's obvious what your problem is. You're just a rule taker. If you decide you're Turkey, it's obvious what your problem is. The Turkey customs union situation would be a ridiculous thing for Britain to agree to, frankly. Or if you go to Canada, well it's obvious what your problem is – business is going to say, 'Ok, you can do that but it's going to be severe disruption', the financial service people will say, 'Well, ok, there's going to be significant job losses.' All of that. Those are your choices.

So when members of Parliament are forced to come to a choice then I think at that point they will say, 'Ok, this what I think but I'm not going to take the full responsibility so I'm going to share responsibility with the people', and that allows a referendum to be a healing process. I agree, if you suddenly just had one now without any of that process gone through then people would think 'You're trying to ask us the same question until we give you the answer that you want'. But the reality is... the sensible thing... test it in this way: supposing David Cameron had said at the outset, 'We're going to have a referendum, after the result, if there is a result in favour of Brexit, we're going to have a negotiation, at the end of that negotiation we'll put to you the negotiated settlement versus the status quo.' People would have said, 'Ok, that's reasonable.' It's only because it wasn't done that people kind of say, 'Oh, no, no, no, you're now just trying to ask us the question again and again and again...' But really, it's obviously sensible that once you negotiate a settlement you say, 'Tell us: do you prefer the house you're in or the house you are moving to?' That's reasonable.

Akash Paun (AP): Do you think that devolution to the other UK nations contributed to a resurgence of English nationalism and therefore perhaps to Brexit?

TB: A little bit but I wouldn't exaggerate it. I think that English nationalism has always been quite strong. But again, you've always got to explain devolution to people. You see, it's like when people talk about the West Lothian question. I came to the conclusion that the answer to it wasn't a logical answer, but it was a common sense answer – which is that because England is so much more dominant in terms of population, GDP, share of public spending, control of Westminster, than the constituent parts of the UK, then even though logically you could say, 'Well how come there is the same number of MPs when you've got devolution?', in common sense terms it's a sort of compensation. So I think it all depends how the English look at it. If the English think

the UK is basically a good thing, not a bad thing, then it's a small price to pay for the Union. You need politicians prepared to argue for why the Union is a good thing. And what's weird at the moment is you've got Conservative MPs, like the Boris Johnsons, the Rees-Moggs, who say they're vigorous Unionists but are actually really playing on English nationalism.

AP: You mentioned the West Lothian question. When you were PM, Parliament voted to introduce university top up fees and foundation hospitals in England when a majority of English MPs voted against that, but the votes were carried with Scottish and Welsh Labour support. Did you have concerns with legitimacy at the time – and how do you see it going forward?

TB: Yes, it was always a political problem for really obvious reasons. But in the end, as I say, if you balance up the pros and cons of the Union and how it operates then you can't really end up... if you have MPs not voting on certain things and so on it is very hard, you end up with two classes of MPs at Westminster. So the solution we came out with... it's a bit like the House of Lords...the solution we came out with is a pretty idiosyncratic British solution but I feel it works better than the alternative.

AP: So you're not in favour of English Votes for English Laws reform, which were introduced in 2015?

TB: No, I always thought it's dangerous to do that. But I understand why it's done and the thing still functions, so I guess... But, I was always worried about it – because one of the things when you do devolution is you've got to look for ways of binding the UK together. If I have a criticism of our own position on this it's that we didn't look for enough ways, culturally and socially, of keeping the UK feeling we're part of one nation at the same time as being individual nations within that collective. That's why I was always resistant to more concessions to English nationalism because I think the Union only works if you accept that there is an essential imbalance between England, that it is so much more dominant than all the other parts of the UK put together.

AP: Should you have tried harder to create stronger devolved institutions in England, at a regional or city level?

TB: City level. Yes, I mean, people forget this: there was no mayor for London until we came to power. And I was always in favour of city mayors. And I think that's a good devolution. The trouble with the regional assemblies is, and I know this from my own region up in the north east where I was a member of Parliament, is... people don't feel themselves part of a region in that way. I used to have this debate within the Cabinet with those people who were very strongly in favour of regional assemblies, and we agreed to have a referendum on one, the North East. I was talking to people in my own constituency and they felt part of County Durham, they felt part of the North East in a way, but Teeside and Tyneside didn't feel part of the same entity as each other – it's just the way it is, ok! It was never rooted in the same way as Scotland or Wales, so I always thought city mayors was a better way, and unitary authorities where you could do that, was a better way to go.

BM: Do you think devolution makes it easier or harder to be Prime Minister?

TB: I'm tempted to say it depends how it is working at any one moment in time. I think if we hadn't done devolution we would have had an unstoppable pressure for Scottish independence and I think if we hadn't done the Good Friday Agreement, you'd have had a very ugly situation in Northern Ireland. But look, the test of any reform is after it's done – if you fast forward, are people trying to get rid of it? And there's no party trying to suggest that we get rid of any of this devolution settlement now, really.

BM: So if you fast forward 20 years, what do we need to make it work?

TB: Well, apart from the obvious, immediate thing of escaping from the problems of Brexit, I think we should think more carefully about how we have a British and UK identity and not just an English, Scottish, Irish, Welsh identity. I think that's important. People used to think it was a bit trivial when I used to say we should put the football leagues together and things. It's just you need to find ways in which people are realising they have a lot in common, as well as space for the diversity of the UK. I'd do a lot more of that.

I was very struck by the fact that once you did devolution and then you separated, even institutions like the BBC became separated in a very clear way. You just lost that sense of a common agenda that you are waking up to every day. Obviously, that's now happened. We need to be thinking, we need to be more active and passionate in our defence of the Union. And maybe if one good thing comes out, once we get rid of this Brexit thing, is that we really need to think about what is the place of the UK in the world and why is it sensible for countries to be together in the UK.

I think the reasons for that, by the way, are very, very important and sensible. I mean, Scotland as an independent country would immediately lose its ability to influence things through membership of the UK. And, actually, I always say that the arguments of the Brexiteers are very similar to the arguments of the Scottish nationalists ultimately. It's just a misunderstanding of what nationhood really entails in the 21st century.

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