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# THE AXE FILES

## The Axe Files - Ep. 191: Tony Blair

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**Axelrod:** [00:00:00] Tony Blair it's great great to be with you here in London. You know you are a globally known person but a lot of people who listen to this podcast certainly in America are not all that familiar with your personal story and in preparing and I know you've written an autobiography and so on. In preparing for this I was struck by some things in your in your biography particularly how you grew up because you had a very sort of interesting childhood that changed very dramatically. And I just wanted to ask you about that about your folks.

**Blair:** [00:00:48] Yes I was brought up actually in a. In a very conservative household by my father was a member of the Conservative Party my my father come from a very poor background himself. He was a foster child in the pool part of Glasgow. He was actually the secretary of the Young Communists of Scotland when he was a young guy. He then went.

**Axelrod:** [00:01:10] That wasn't the conservative part of his...

**Blair:** [00:01:12] No. Exactly. So he was very he was very very radical. And then he he literally had the opposite journey to most people in the Second World War. He joined the armed forces with vote in the second world war and went from being a private to that he was an acting major by the end of it and switched from socialistic in this socialist conservative which is a very odd. Most people in Britain which is why.

**Axelrod:** [00:01:42] There are usually intermediate steps.

**Blair:** [00:01:44] Yeah but he anyway he became the strong conservative. And so I grew up in a conservative household household but I always had a great awareness of the reasons why my my father basically felt that the more left wing part of politics held people like him back. I'd say he was very much part of that aspirational Mrs. Thatcher type of conservative. And but then when I was 10 years old he suffered a very serious stroke. He was running for office at the time he was about to become a Conservative MP would no doubt become a Conservative minister. And he would you know he was a very very accomplished politician and lawyer and speaker by that time. But he at 40 years old he suffered a very serious stroke.

**Axelrod:** [00:02:28] And let me just ask you before I want to talk about that were you involved did you. Were you aware of his politics. Did you go with him to events. Was this something that interested you even then.

**Blair:** [00:02:42] Yeah. I mean it. Even after his stroke he stayed with the conservative party and we used to see people their own and often we would have dinners with aspiring Conservative MP and politics kind of flowed through our home pretty much.

**Axelrod:** [00:03:00] But the stroke was he 42 years old.

**Blair:** [00:03:03] 40 actually. So this was a.

**Axelrod:** [00:03:06] Stunning.

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**Blair:** [00:03:06] It was just it was terrible. I mean it was brought about by overwork actually and because he was so ambitious as a guy and he he then had to learn to speak again of a sort of three or four years but never fully recovered. So it was never really able to be an active politician again.

**Axelrod:** [00:03:22] And how did that impact on you. You were 10 years old or thereabouts.

**Blair:** [00:03:27] Yeah it impacted a lot. I mean it was a big change in all family circumstances. He had been earning a lot of money and suddenly didn't he. You know his life changed completely went from being in the northeast of England he was becoming a really known figure obviously. You then moved out of the picture altogether. So we were very aware of the change circumstances and then your mother.

**Axelrod:** [00:03:52] Not that many years later became ill herself.

**Blair:** [00:03:56] My mother died from cancer when I was still young and my sister actually was also very ill for a long period of time. I was sort of when I say this people it all sounds as if my childhood must have been very traumatic actually for all of the problems and challenges. You know I had a I was lucky in having a very loving family and actually grew up in feeling perfectly well settled but I think you know sometimes you look back on your life and you things that didn't strike you at the time suddenly you realize now that was quite a defining moment. And I think the combination of my illness as my parents and this changes in our circumstances gave me a very keen sense of the fragility. Of position and the need to make your way in life and work hard and strive and.

**Axelrod:** [00:04:49] And presumably that fragility also meant strive quickly to reach very high very quickly because you rose rather quickly through the Labor party right.

**Blair:** [00:05:04] Yes. At university I became more to the left in politics.

**Axelrod:** [00:05:10] What made you what made that actually to do.

**Blair:** [00:05:15] Curious things happened to me at the same time. I met a group of people of Oxford University two Australians an African and an Indian. So none of them were actually from my own country. And one of them was very influential in reigniting my Christianity. So I sort of rediscovered faith and then at the same time the others took me on a journey where I started to realise that social conditions really mattered to people's development whereas I had always had a very sort of individualistic view of you know human existence drummed into me by my dad. And so I moved to the left of university under their influence and then in the Labor Party you know I was actually extremely lucky to get into Parliament as young as I did when I was just 30 and then frankly at the time the Labor Party was in such disarray that anyone who seemed relatively grieving anywhere is in relatively capable got phos promotion.

**Axelrod:** [00:06:18] You skipped over one part of your biography I found intriguing is the interregnum where you were a band manager that was apparently important to you music as well.

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**Blair:** [00:06:31] Yeah and I was I managed a band of them was in a band for some time and this is this is great because it I think one thing is really important politics is to have as broad an experience of life as possible. You know being obsessive about mean about politics is dangerous being committed is very important. But if you literally see anything in your life I think you become a little narrow.

**Axelrod:** [00:06:56] When you went to Parliament you you came under the tutelage of Neil Kinnock who was the Labor leader and a brilliant orator pretty far left. I would say. What did you learn from him and what did you adopt from that experience. What were the 80 What did the 80s teach you.

**Blair:** [00:07:26] So in the 80s the Labor Party was kind of subject to a sort of takeover by the far left that it repelled only just like we very nearly which were taken over by the far left at the time. Neocon was in some ways a sort of compromise because he was from the left but a much more sort of mainstream type of figure. And it turned out that he was a leader of you know considerable courage and was prepared to take on but were actually quite undemocratic far left forces and he did that really brilliantly. And I learnt a lot from him. But I also believe that in the end we didn't move far enough in terms of trying to marry together the way the modern world was developing with Labor Party principles traditional Labor Party principles. So you know unfortunately he never won an election. But his impact on changing the Labor Party in helping put it in a position where it was eventually electable was very important.

**Axelrod:** [00:08:32] You famously were about the project of redefining the Labor Party New Labor and assembled a really sophisticated team around you to do that. What was the sort of propelling philosophy that drove that project.

**Blair:** [00:08:54] I think it was it was really the unification of very traditional concepts and values around social justice with a belief that in a world of accelerating change you had to modernize the application so that for example was no good for us simply to advocate an old fashioned type of state as the answer to people's problems because not the way that people lived any moral worked any moral thought anymore. And so it was really kind of worked out political philosophy that was about ensuring that you use essential mission as a progressive force remain the same which is to open up opportunity for people to create a more just society but the means of doing it would be much more modern much more related to the real world much away from a kind of big state solution.

**Axelrod:** [00:09:46] You were elected five your party was elected you took leadership about five years after Bill Clinton was elected in the U.S. How much did you study his campaign and his approach because he also was about redefining the Democratic Party after the 80s when the party was very much in the wilderness and very much on the left.

**Blair:** [00:10:07] Yeah we studied it a lot obviously and and you know the concept of the time of the New Democrats and so on and made a big difference the way we looked at things and that was at that point there seemed to be a unity between what you needed to do to win and a genuine principled view that our parties had to modernize and change the world around us was changing.

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**Axelrod:** [00:10:40] And what would what were the sort of fundamental things that were sort of the lynchpins of their platform.

**Blair:** [00:10:50] So there would be things like an you know reforming the state. And in that case for us that was very much about reforming public services in education in health care. We put forward big reforms that change the structure of the services and made them frankly much more oriented towards personal choice for the citizen. So that was one big area of change another area would be that we work with trade unions but we would work with business to say you know the notion of strengthening enterprise. You know championing the creation of new business was also something that was very important to us. Technology even at that stage I mean actually Bill Clinton did the Human Genome Project which we launched in which he now in time has obviously become extremely important much more important than I understood at the time by the way but so that was also part of it. And we were into in an international terms we were very much for engagement not isolation for free trade and not protectionism. So these were you know these these were the big ideas that we worked out over a long period of time and were very similar developments in the US and here. I think the other thing was on Law and Order for example. I mean the Labor Party had always been in the UK thought of as soft a law and order law and order was entirely a conservative issue. One of the things I did before I became leader was really change our position on that. And and you know come up with what I used to describe as a sort of you know. Private shorthand as sort of pro-gay rights and tough on crime. I mean so in other words socially liberal but not when it came to people being aggressive or abusive towards others.

**Axelrod:** [00:12:41] You know we were here for a conference of the University of Chicago the Institute of Politics was involved with that. We just had a bit of a discussion about immigration and you know I'm looking at the politics of today and in certain ways there are parallels to that period. And immigration has become in certain ways a divisive issue in our politics in the way that crime was then perhaps crime and welfare. And you're a believer. We've seen this. We've seen this vote on Brecht's here in Britain. You're a believer that the immigration and the free flow of people across borders is as much a driver of Brack's and the sort of reaction that drove it in America. Trump is a reflection of that as well. Talk about that.

**Blair:** [00:13:44] So immigration I think is a huge issue. I think it was the principal driver behind the Briggs's vote. I think it's an issue all over Europe today. There are new parties being created around and there are governments falling and governments rising as a result of it. And you know I I adopt towards it the falling position which is is has some of the spirit and intent behind as it were what we were doing 20 years ago and what Bill Clinton was doing in the US which is to say I think in respect of immigration we need rules but not prejudices. Right. So in other words I think if you want to take the poison of immigration as an issue out of the system you've got to be prepared to accept and act upon the genuine anxieties that people have anxieties that are partly about our culture being changed in ways that we find difficult for our way of life or are there. Is there an absence of proper structure an order around the way immigration happens. In my view you have to deal with that then to be able to make the absolutely necessary cases to why immigration is really a good thing and not a bad thing. I mean immigration has brought enormous benefits to Britain European immigration has brought enormous benefits to Britain. So it would be a tragedy if our failure from the center to deal with people's anxieties left the field open for those who want to take the immigration issue and exploited. And you know all the time. But my view is you. In today's world you need answers. Otherwise you just get the anger right

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now. What I think is an open question and there's a big debate in the Democrats in the U.S. and it's a big debate in the Labor Party and elsewhere in Europe and on the progressive side is has the center ground actually shifted and does it or does it no longer exist in the way that Bill Clinton used to talk about it now. Or is it just that we're not advocating it anymore. You know this is a really interesting question which I you know my view and my instinct is is the problem is the center grounds not arguing its case but I may be wrong.

**Axelrod:** [00:16:00] Well the question is is whether the center ground has a case that is sufficiently responsive to the anxieties and concerns people have not just cultural but economic.

**Blair:** [00:16:13] Right. Hundred percent. So so the question is to my mind because I think the circumstances today a completely different from 20 years ago when I came to power because we were in a relatively benign set of circumstances. The challenge is a much bigger today. The change in accelerating change I was describing is accelerating even faster particularly around the changes that the next wave of technology will bring. You know globalization has got its losers. Right. And there are communities and people who feel completely shut out left behind by it. So in my view you need solutions that are radical but still sensible and the risk is if you if the center ground isn't sufficiently strong to put that forward then you'll end up with solutions that may be radical but nonsensical.

**Axelrod:** [00:17:00] It's fair to say that if you were to show up at a Labor Party meeting today you would not be greeted with a rousing ovation.

**Blair:** [00:17:11] That is probably true. Well it depends which Labor Party but probably yes.

**Axelrod:** [00:17:15] And the Labor Party has drifted pretty far left in part because of anxieties over the economy a sense that in the words of both the left and the populist right that the economy has been rigged and that there are winners not just because of globalization but the the way capitalism has been gamed that that leaves a lot of people on the on the outside and create a small group of winners. How how does the center respond to that.

**Blair:** [00:17:53] You know this is the absolute key challenge because the truth is the answer to it is to reform the system and not scrap it. Because if you return to for example if the Labor Party here goes back to a whole set of programs around just more spending and nationalization and it's it's not going to it's not really going to get those communities or those people the opportunity to prosper in the world is changing. You've got to equip them for that change. So I would be much much more radical in the policies putting forward around technology how we use it how we deal with it how we regulate it. I read much more radical in terms of infrastructure and probably actually things like tax and welfare reform and you know in terms of infrastructure.

**Axelrod:** [00:18:38] It involves spending

**Blair:** [00:18:40] I think it would certainly involve spending differently and I think there's a you know what what it is extraordinary to me is that in 2017 you know you still have a basic attitude towards tax and spending. There's not really that much different from 50 years ago. But the world is completely different. And government itself is still pretty much the same. I mean I always say if you know Clement Attlee who won the great victory in 1945 came back to Britain today. I mean he'd be astonished at the changes until he walked back into the seat of

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government in Whitehall and then he be in completely familiar territory. So this is this is I think the challenge for for the progressive forces today and you can see it around issues like tuition fees is classic.

**Axelrod:** [00:19:34] As we as we discussed the economy I think I'm going to take a short break and we'll be right back with former Prime Minister Tony Blair.

**Axelrod:** [00:19:46] Another thing that defined your tenure and in shaped attitudes toward you particularly among your your base was the Iraq war and your decision to side with President Bush on that issue. Talk to me about that decision. And and what reflections you have on it now.

**Blair:** [00:20:16] You know all 14 years later 15 years later is that the most difficult decision I've had to take an and you know as I have said on many occasions you know when you come to a decision that is that important and that big you know you have to take it on the basis of what you think is right on the information you have at the time. And and I always say to people that I can regret the failures in intelligence obviously and I think there are many things we could have done differently in how we manage the situation afterwards. But in my own view still is that we were in a better position in the Middle East today without trying to deal with a regime that would have been clinging onto power as the wave of the Arab Spring it hit the nations of the Middle East. And so you know I can regret much about it but I can't regret the actual decision in removing him. But yes it was a hugely politically difficult decision and the only thing I simply asked the people should do is that they should understand it was taken as a genuine decision in good faith and.

**Axelrod:** [00:21:37] This has been a subject of exploration over time in Parliament and elsewhere. I mean there are those who you know use the words war criminal suggesting that you went in under false pretenses and so on it's eroded. You're you're the political capital that you've built up over a year.

**Blair:** [00:22:00] Yeah it's it's it's it was difficult at the time it has been as difficult since for sure. But in the end you you have one principal obligation I think because the leader of a country in these circumstances and that is to do what you think is right or you may not be right but that's a judgment that history can pass. But you should do what you think is right. And you know I agonized over it whether it was best to act and remove Saddam would it was he going to be continue to be a threat or not. And in the end conclude it was better to remove him than not.

**Axelrod:** [00:22:42] I guess the debate in the US was was two. One is what relationship to this have to do with the 9/11 attacks because it seemed a bit at 8:10 you added. And then the second was whether in fact by removing him in the way that he was removed you unleashed not you personally but that action unleashed the sectarian forces that we are now living with to this day.

**Blair:** [00:23:15] Sure that is that is what people often often say in and you know the debate about it will go on for a long time. My view is that the connection is still between terrorism and the possibility of the acquisition of nuclear chemical biological weapons as was then and is now a huge problem and challenge still. And I think you know and I I spend a lot of time in the Middle East now I'm that twice a month and have been for many years. And my view is that the forces of work whether in Iraq or now in Syria or in Libya are all over the Middle East are actually deep

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rooted and we should not forget the 911 calls happened before the invasion of Afghanistan or Iraq. So I think you can debate this but I think my own judgment is these forces are very very deep. And in the end the answer to them is not to keep a whole lot of repressive dictatorships in power. The answer to them in the end is to evolve those societies in the direction of greater freedom and greater democracy.

**Axelrod:** [00:24:28] Can democracy flourish where there aren't civil institutions and where there is longstanding sectarian strife. I mean that's the it seems the challenge that we've run into in several different places.

**Blair:** [00:24:45] Yes so the question is does that mean that for you you know you keep the dictatorships there. I think what the Arab Spring shows you because it's really important to put this also within the context of what happened there in 2011 all of these dictatorships started to topple or come under pressure. And the reason for that was that in the end the ordinary people are not prepared to live under that form of government particularly when it's a dictatorship that is based on a sectarian position because obviously whether in Saddam's Iraq or in Assad's Syria there are whole groups of people who are excluded from power on sectarian lines. So you're absolutely right in saying course the challenge is once you remove that dictatorship out come those tribal and religious grievances and you know that frankly is the thing that was underestimated. I've always said I mean that is the the central issue in terms of how we handle that was the underestimation of what would happen because those civil institutions weren't there in the way they needed to be. But in the end I think the the answer is you've got to build them over time. And the question is can you this is why. Strangely enough when it came to the Arab Spring I was one of the people arguing then particularly in relation to Syria but also actually in relation to Libya if you can find a way of evolving the situation and that transition then do it because the one thing we learned from Afghanistan is wrong is you can get rid of the dictatorship. But then these other problems surface. So if you can do it through transition peacefully do it. And the strange thing was that people would say well don't listen to them because because of what happened in Iraq but in a way that is the problem we ended up with in Libya is precisely the same problem. Yes. And now where I sort of disagree with some people is they say well then the answer is to keep all these people in power. And I say well that's not a good answer. And even the people won't put up with it. And then on the other side of it though people who say we just got to carry on regardless and I would say no of course you've got to learn the lessons of the experience we went through.

**Axelrod:** [00:27:02] You know I listened to you and you make this case for for change and for the rejection of authoritarian leaders you've been criticized here for your relationship with some of them. General Sisi in Egypt for example who their democracy took hold. There was an election and then the Muslim Brotherhood. You know the interesting thing about democracy is you have to live with the verdict of the people and the Muslim Brotherhood got elected and governing them in a tyrannical way. The military responded. And now you have another authentic authoritarian regime there. And you know you've been criticized for being close to them by human rights people and so on.

**Blair:** [00:27:55] Yes so this is where you strap very tricky and difficult difficult political problems because the truth of the matter is when the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in Egypt they started to change the country dramatically. And I'm not sure that any form of democracy would have survived if they carried on in power. And when the people came out in the street and they

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came up I think 13 and 20 million of them came out. I mean it was a big popular uprising. It wasn't a you know simply that the military intervened. Frankly if you had the Muslim Brotherhood still in power in Egypt today. I think the region would be a lot more dangerous. So but do I think that in the end you have to evolve and transition towards democracy the rule of law whether in Egypt or anywhere else. Yes of course.

**Axelrod:** [00:28:47] You wouldn't hold out Sisi as a paragon of human rights.

**Blair:** [00:28:52] I think it's very difficult for the Egyptian government because they are subject to real pressures of terrorism and security questions. But you know I. Don't misunderstand me. I am and always will be an advocate of the rule of law and of human rights. It's just that in the circumstances of the Middle East it can be very difficult. Yeah but the question is is he trying to move the country in the right direction. And I think you know in the economic reforms he's making the social reforms he's making for example what they're trying to do now in the education system. They basically are. And you know if you went back to a situation where the Muslim Brotherhood back in control Egypt I think you know a very very difficult situation as I say for them for the whole region.

**Axelrod:** [00:29:36] Yeah. As you say it's it's tricky I remember sitting with President Obama and and and Hosni Mubarak at the beginning of the president's term and it was a interesting scene Mubarak it was it was like a scene out of the Godfather you know years old and he called him over and he's. And Obama was asking for help on the on the Israeli Palestinian issue and he said well we'll do what we can he says but you learn the Middle East is a very complicated neighborhood and.

**Blair:** [00:30:06] That's certainly true. But you know the difference with Sisi today for example is that he is genuinely trying to help on the Middle East peace process. You know traditionally the Egyptians to be very frank stood back from it. He is prepared to get into it what the Egyptians have been doing in Gaza these last few months have been incredibly important. I mean in my view actually offers us the most significant chance of progress on the Israeli-Palestinian question. So you know it's it's it's a very difficult thing this because you know what you understand about politics and you know this very well David riming been with President Obama is you get into situations where the you are making compromises in order to try and get a good outcome. And you know the way I look at it is that there are regimes that I would say are obviously less than democratic. Let's put it that way. Who are taking that country in completely the wrong direction oppressing and brutalizing their people and their economies going down not up. And then you've got countries with a less than democratic form of government suddenly measured in Western terms who are actually trying to move that country in the right direction and making the reforms that hopefully will allow them to evolve over time to a properly democratic system. And you can never make a perfect judgment about this but in each case when I'm thinking about presidents or prime ministers who we work with many through my insitute around the world you know all the time. The question that I have in my mind is this guy trying to do the right thing or not. And it's sometimes very difficult and sometimes Frank might get that judgment wrong.

**Axelrod:** [00:32:00] Yeah. The world is a complicated place. The I just want to I want to ask you this because I would be remiss if I didn't and you to have the chance to respond to it but you know one of the criticisms you have is that you don't you haven't just traveled on behalf of your

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institute but on behalf of your own business interests and that you've represented some of these regimes in in the Middle East in Kazakhstan and so on that have less than stellar human rights records and to your people who have supported you. What is your answer to that.

**Blair:** [00:32:35] My answer is do not believe what you read in a large part the British media about my post prime ministerial activities because this is in literally the creation of a sort of image someone going around the world lining their pockets and all sorts of dictators. And we did have a program in Kazakhstan for a time.

**Axelrod:** [00:32:54] And when you say problem what are you what do you do.

**Blair:** [00:32:57] So we were helping the very specifically on reforms because as a whole group of younger reform minded ministers and we had a whole team of people that were living and working in the country. And personally I didn't take any money from it. I didn't know what the other regimes are that was supposed to do because frankly I work in the Middle East has always been not for profit. And the work we've done in Africa has always been not for profit. So a lot of these allegations frankly are not correct. So I accept. You know there's. People criticize working in Kazakhstan at all. My point is very simple. It's a majority Muslim country that treats its people with great its minorities with great respect including its Jewish community. It's an ally of the west despite being sandwiched between Russia and China. And you know it's the only country I can think of that gave up its nuclear weapons and did it voluntarily. So of course it's not a again a Western style democracy but the work you did that was was good works. You know I've spent the vast bulk of my time since leaving office on this you know if I really wanted to be if commercial work was my my main priority I'd have been spending my time doing it and do these regimes support your philanthropic work and what they do if I'm doing a project in the country they can do that. And basically I'm working in the what we do in Africa for example which is really the main focus of what we do now that work we will. Get support from you know various of the development organizations.

**Axelrod:** [00:34:36] You, one of the big tasks you took on when you left your post here was as the negotiator for the so-called quartet Russia the US the United Nations because the E.U. on the Middle East and on Israel and the Palestinians that many many men have run up on those rocks. You being one of them good men and women. Where where do you think that is going. I mean why it is we see more settlements being developed by the Israelis in the territories in the occupied areas more a hardened position on the part of the Palestinians. What do you see hope in the future.

**Blair:** [00:35:32] Yeah. I mean I think there is hope in the future but its going to come through this burgeoning and developing relationship between the Israelis and the Arabs. Now they will never have a proper relationship unless the Palestinian issue is dealt with. But the thing that would give an Israeli prime minister strength to do a peace deal as if it was fully supported by the region. And the thing that would give the Palestinians the confidence to make the compromises would be if they knew they had the region onside to do that. So.

**Axelrod:** [00:36:07] That was a project Obama was working on when we met with Mubarak.

**Blair:** [00:36:12] Yeah. And the important thing I think to recognize is that despite all the difficulties there is some progress there. I mean I even when I left the quartet position I mean

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the problem with the quartet position was very simple actually which is that I made a fatal mistake for any politician which is I adopted a position that had responsibility not power because I was never actually involved in the peace negotiations formally at least. But since I left that I've carried on working that I have an office in Israel now an office in the Middle East region and I am convinced that there is a real opportunity for peace provided that we can get to the point where the possibilities of strategic partnership between Israel and the Arab states properly recognized and formed part of the underpinning for any peace process for the Palestinians.

**Axelrod:** [00:37:03] Is the building that the Israelis are doing now in those territories in those occupied areas. Are those an impediment to.

**Blair:** [00:37:13] The settlements. You know I could literally bore you for hours on settlements I mean important thing to realize about what people do about settlements is that in that word there are all sorts of different things right. I mean they're all on the east side of the green line if you like. Some of them are specifically in Jewish neighborhoods of East Jerusalem which will come with the state of Israel in any settlement some are within some of the automake called the main settlement blocks which are now you know reasonably significant towns or cities and then some of them are dotted around the West Bank in circumstances where if they are built up over time they really will become an impediment to the possibility of a Palestinian state. Now my attitude to it is the quicker you therefore get to an agreement on territorial boundaries the better. And you know of course I I I think it's important that nothing is done by Israel that impedes the prospect of of the two state solution because it remains the only viable solution is going to be.

**Axelrod:** [00:38:25] We were talking earlier at the conference about the challenges to democracies today and I said that I think technology and the pace of change is difficult for democracies. Which war which are set up to be in certain ways plodding especially when there are deep divisions and the inability to respond to this rapid change is really difficult. But talk to me about your your sense of the state of of Western democracies today.

**Blair:** [00:39:01] Western democracies are under real challenge I think and because the way that the political discourse works today is very divided very fragmented very polarized. That curiously produces a situation of gridlock and paralysis in the political systems. What that means is that the necessary changes that should take place in order to equip people for a fast changing world don't happen. And then people become very frustrated with the political system and then tend to go you know even more to the extremes. So you know you can notice this all over the western world right now. Politics is dividing into into a sort of nationalistic right. There's then what I would call a more kind of old fashioned left but has had a renewal and rehabilitation of some of its policies. And then you've got what I would still say is is is a substantial middle but it's not as political parties get taken over by more extreme elements then they're not necessarily represented in the same way and they find it far harder to get traction now sometimes partly through the accident of the French political system he will get someone like Macron who emerges but other than that you're trying to and you're trying to deal with a political situation in which increasingly in order to appeal to your activist base you've got to be quite confrontational towards those that don't agree with you or in the different political party.

**Axelrod:** [00:40:44] Good politics and bad governance.

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**Blair:** [00:40:46] Yeah this is this is a problem I think a real problem because in the end a lot of the problems a lot of the solutions the problems we face are practical and are really ideological. Now I think what they do involve which is where I think the progressive side is is as you know as well with where things have moved on from the time to myself and Bill Clinton went where things have changed. Is that you will need a greater role for what I would call a strategic and empowering government. That's you know that is definitely true. Because these big changes that are necessary in infrastructure technology and so on will require a government that is active and powerful. But it's important that governments not simply switch the clock back half century because that's not going to work.

**Axelrod:** [00:41:36] We're going to take another short break and we'll be right back with Tony Blair. It's I want to talk about the current politics of your country and my country and how they fit into this rubric of the challenges to Western democracy that you just mentioned. We should talk about it and the forces that interestingly the same sort of profile of voter who voted for Brecht's to remove Britain from the EU match up very nicely with the base of President Trump older less educated more a small town and rural than than city. On the other side younger more metropolitan higher levels of education. So there seems to be something going on larger than just one election on one side of the pond or the other.

**Blair:** [00:42:42] Yes sure. There's a you know there. Is a real sense amongst a significant part of the population of economic and cultural alienation and that's producing a sharp reaction against globalization. And that's you know I feel we've got to be more self-critical on the progressive side of politics. I think there are reasons why people will vote for the right that aren't necessarily all about feeling left behind. And you know there is a danger we come out with this of the stereotype of brig's it all in a Trump supporter. That is you know actually intensifies our inability to reach and understand why people are voting in the way that they are. And so you know this is why my my view is that you have to deal with what are legitimate anxieties.

**Axelrod:** [00:43:46] You mentioned immigration as being.

**Blair:** [00:43:48] Immigration is one. You know there are elements of sort of what I would call and I don't like the phrase but you put in inverted commas political correctness as well. You've got to be careful with with these issues in my views as progressives not to appear that you're obsessive about them rather than you know advocating fairness for people. I mean I'm not a fan of identity politics. I think it's a it's a dangerous route to go down. I want a vision for the country that is a unifying vision that you bring as many people into the tent as possible. So you know I think yes there's definitely a whole thing going on because people feel the world changing around the very fast they're losing control they're losing their identity. And that is one element of what goes up to to make up that support. But there are other elements. You know there's an element as well I think that thinks things have got to paralyzed and stuck. They want someone to get things done.

**Axelrod:** [00:44:48] You know we spoke about that. I mean that was sort of the appeal of Trump. You know let me take care of it. I'll I'll fix this strongman.

**Blair:** [00:44:57] Yeah. And it's an appeal for people. Now of course the paradox is this that the people who come to power with that sort of strong man image if they're engaged in a very divisive politics what they find when they come to power is that they can build the alliance is

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necessary to get things done. So what you end up with is a situation where the person in charge is kind of railing against the system but not actually able to move the system.

**Axelrod:** [00:45:35] Yes.

**Blair:** [00:45:35] Now that is a difficult and you know we we face a very similar situation here in the UK where you've got Briggs's is such a dominating thing. The truth isn't the government is not really able to get anything else done. So these big challenges we're talking Malya technology infrastructure attacks are falling Cetron is not happening when they need to happen. So it's it's a it's a strange thing and this is why I say that the concept of building bridges which is a diminishing concept in western politics you know I know you voted for Donald Trump or I know you voted for breaks it but I want to understand why you did not actually want to build an alliance with you around these things because I think part of what you stand for I disagree with but part of what you stand for I can understand and I think there's a better way of dealing with it. There's this way and I think that building bridges concept is incredibly important in politics but it's not is not in vogue has a breakfast story in well it ends in that. I mean to say the obvious doing it or not and doing it in a way but where do you think it's where the youth at Europe as a political analyst as there is in this country right now. The clock is ticking. March 29. 2019 Britain is out. What stops that clock or what produces a result that you and others would find.

**Axelrod:** [00:47:16] Satisfying.

**Blair:** [00:47:17] Well I am increasingly of the view that it is possible that the country will change its mind on breaks it and I'm more optimistic about that prospect now even though I still think the likelihood is it goes ahead. But the truth is we know a lot more about this process now than we did. New facts are coming to light all the time. You know for example we thought we would get an immediate 350 million pounds a week extra for our health care system that desperately needs the money at that. Turns out we're going to be having is spending less money on the health service not getting more money for it. You know the economy we were the fastest growing economy in the G7 in 2016. We're now the slowest. If we look at things like the motor car industry the investment significantly down I mean done by large amounts and our currency of course has been devalued. So I think that I'm not saying this will happen.

**Axelrod:** [00:48:21] But yeah I mean you know we we we were speaking about this people. It's hard to describe these things that you describe are not necessarily felt in the daily lives of of people. And it's hard to describe pain until you actually feel it and you look at polling now and while people may have more misgivings it still suggests that if Brecht's the bricks and vote were held today the people that a majority albeit a slim one would vote for him.

**Blair:** [00:48:53] Is it true that the polling if you look at the headline figures is not change yet but I think it's when people begin to understand that one of the reasons why we've got such a problem in our health care system which they really do care about is because we are going through this basic process we're actually going to find a tougher set of economic circumstances. And we're losing by the way employees we desperately need European workers who are not coming in the same number and which we really urgently need within our health care system and where the government frankly it's only focus has got to be Brexit. I mean there's no bandwidth really for anything else. So I think it's when people start if people start to see a connection between the problems the country has and going through this this is traumatic and

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dramatic change in the country where you're trying to unwind over 40 years of trade connection an economic connection and you know that I think that it can change. But this is this is the debate that will be had in the country and it's going to be a big and a lively debate and it's going to carry on.

**Axelrod:** [00:50:04] And you don't think that Theresa May who's the unpopular leader right now can get a can fashion an agreement that she could get through Parliament.

**Blair:** [00:50:18] Well it's very hard because there is a there is a very fundamental disagreement at the heart of the Conservative Party this is the problem because you know first of all you decide whether you do bring it or not. OK but once you decide to do it there are very many different varieties of Braggs it there's a Braggs at which you get out of the political structures of Europe but stay in the economic structures become like Norway or Switzerland. And while we decided not to do that if you're not doing that that's much tougher. So you have to then negotiate new trade arrangements with Europe is very complicated to do if you want to get close to Europe or alternatively you could decide that you don't want that closer relationship. Or alternatively you could decide you're actually prepared to go out without a deal at all and say we're we're we're completely free and you know if we have tariffs that's that's fine. We just take the chance on that. The problem is at the moment within the government there's quite profound disagreement amongst its leading members as to whether they're arguing for a future for Britain that is outside of Europe but still deeply connected to Europe or a future for Britain that says we're out of Europe. And what's more we're now going to Moscow Moscow alone as not Europe which is you know it's as it's a it's a this is the sort of you know we should become like Singapore type of thing.

**Axelrod:** [00:51:44] I can't leave you without asking you about America's role in the world today. There could not be a more profound shift than the one we've seen between President Obama and President Trump. President Trump's articulated the America First approach critical of NATO withdrawn from the TPP and really urging by the way Britain to go through with BRICS and advocating bilateral agreements and so on. What is the state of America's leadership in the world today and what concerns do you have about its.

**Blair:** [00:52:33] It's a very it's a very important time in international relations and you know I'm I'm a profound believer in America's role in the world and that it's got to stay engaged with the world and build partnerships and build alliances. And look I think you know know I tried to be. I mean first of all because by the way President Trump is your president. Frankly it's better if he succeeds then if he fails for everyone and.

**Axelrod:** [00:53:05] You know him.

**Blair:** [00:53:06] I don't know him. But you know I can see. It's not a closed book. I think it's only fair to say so.

**Axelrod:** [00:53:16] Yes I think that's fair.

**Blair:** [00:53:20] The trouble is you can for example say there's a certain unfairness in the trading relationship with China or you can want to amend trade agreements or you can say for example that in NATO there should be a big a burden borne by European countries. I think

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what's incredibly important is that this view of the world which in America first I mean in one sense. Why wouldn't you put America first. We should put Britain first. I mean everyone should put that country first but it's how you frame that and how you do it in a way that may rectify what you see as problems which you've got a mandate to fix. But do it in a way that keeps your alliances strong. And you know the dominant geopolitical change in the 20th century is going to be China. I mean it's you know every time I go there and I come back I realize what is happening in China is going completely to change the geopolitics of the 21st century. And all nations are going to have to work out how they stand in relation to China because this power is going to be so large. And what is necessary in order to deal with that in my view and have the evolution of China happen in a benign way which I hope believe it will. But it's important that it does why we're going to big trouble is that America stays strong Europe stays strong and the two stay in alliance with each other. Now my only plea to President Trump whoever's American president is approach things in a way that keeps your allies with you and keeps the western world united because we're going to need that as we go through this big geopolitical change which is a perfectly natural change by the way it's going to happen. And it should happen. I mean China's got a right to take its proper place in the world. But just the consequences of this so dramatic that we we need that cohesive set of alliances staying strong and staying behind the values we believe in.

**Axelrod:** [00:55:25] And. And where do you think we. How would you judge this based on the first 10 months or 11 months for the Trump administration. How is he doing in terms of tending to these alliances.

**Blair:** [00:55:41] I think you know what Bob Barr people would say if they're not just playing politics with it is that they're confused about where where things are going at a certain point. And because I say you could say we need data really strong and will continue in America to be absolutely present committed NATO. But you guys you've got to do all. And that's a perfectly reasonable thing and by the way sometimes that's what said that. Other times the signal seemed different or. You know right now I mean with the with what is happening in the in the Far East obviously it's incredibly important that your allies get a strong sense that you're still with them. So I think you know let's see what happens I mean obviously I would have preferred that America's staying the climate change agreement for sure. And you know I think these these big trade partnerships where the right thing to do. I think you know this is one of the things that I think President Obama understood very clearly the need to kind of bind the world together. And I think both for the trans-Atlantic one and transpacific one you know these are really important things so I hope we can recover some sense of momentum towards that.

**Axelrod:** [00:57:01] Yet that doesn't seem to be the thrust of the administration.

**Blair:** [00:57:05] It doesn't although you know one of the things that happens in government is that you do after a time your perception of reality shifts and your understanding of what is necessary both in your country's interests and the interests of the world also can shift and I think this is.

**Axelrod:** [00:57:27] If you're viewing these issues in that context if you're viewing these issues through the lens of your political base and his political base is that nationalistic you know anti-trade sort of xenophobic kind of base. I mean that's so it really is a question of through what lens he's viewing these.

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**Blair:** [00:57:49] Right. So the question is whether the over time that lens can be adjusted. You know and that you you realize there is a way of standing up for your country that is still consistent with building strong partnerships and alliances. By the way that is the right way to stand up for your country because in today's world you need them.

**Axelrod:** [00:58:13] If America does withdraw from some of these arrangements either tacitly or explicitly can that be recovered. It seems like these are voids that get filled very quickly. People make other arrangements you see the rest of the the 11 countries that were involved in the TPP. Now partnering up with each other and with China you know and you see Macron stepping up in a way to fill a void. Can that be recovered.

**Blair:** [00:58:47] It can be recovered. In my view because the void can be easily filled and in any event I think there's sufficient strength in the American system. Look I think it's a very difficult thing to have a conversation about. President Trump with Americans is a bit like having a conversation about brings it back here. You know I was talking to a friend of mine as a Democrat the other day and he said that they have family Thanksgiving dinner they had a terrible row about him and I said Dan was so you mean there were parts of your family that were program and they said no. They said they were all anti-Trump but some of them felt we went anti-Trump enough. This was the source of the wrath. So I know it's difficult to do this but the American system. You've got enormous strengths. OK. The void frankly I don't think can really be filled by anyone else. Having said that the sooner you guys are you know affiliate yourselves the better for all of us because we we need you then we need a strong articulation of western values and Western principles. We we we need this because the way the world's changing and because there are other models of government out there. And you know that there are what I guess what I'm saying is there are ways to cause a president comes with his mandate. He can't just turn around ignore that. But there are ways of fulfilling this. I think sometimes when that side of American politics looks at Europe right. They say you know you shouldn't have the European You should have as separate individual nations and we would do the deal with you as individual nations right. This is a fundamental misunderstanding at the heart of it. None of the European nations. Is like America we're not of that size. OK. So we may be great in proud nations independent nation states but if we are left you know separated from each other from our region we're going to get picked off. By the other place in the world if we together we can partner you and together we can be powerful enough to hold our own. As the world changes so sometimes I think part of the problem is that the way parts of that nationalistic right look at the world is that they're not they're not fully appreciating the fact that the way the world is developing and what actually keeps us together is far more important than anything else. And you know if you take the year if you take the issue of climate change for example now there with American the that that arrangement I think you will find the void filled that I don't think that you know in a way is provided people are going to do it. That's that's fine. But if America started for example to pull itself back from NATO and I don't believe you will. But if you did well that voice only to be filled by anyone else that's dangerous. So this is where where I think we just you know we've got to as well from our side of the Atlantic you know reach out and make sure and try and make sure that the lens through which your president is looking at the world is one that's that's going to strengthen us.

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**Axelrod:** [01:02:25] Good place to leave it. TONY BLAIR Great to be with you. Thank you for this. Thank you for speaking to the group from the University of Chicago. Always good to hear from you.

**Blair:** [01:02:36] It's a pleasure David thank you.