GLOBAL OVERVIEW: A CONVERSATION WITH FORMER PRIME MINISTER OF THE UNITED KINGDOM TONY BLAIR

Announcer 00:00

Welcome to the session on Global Overview. For Part One, please welcome to the stage Executive Chairman of the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change and former United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair, in conversation with Nicholas Kristof, op-ed columnist and political commentator.

Nicholas Kristof 00:21

Thank you all for coming. Mr. Prime Minister, thank you very much for joining us here today. Let's start with—there are a few things happening around the world. Let's take a look at that right now. I mean, in many ways, it seems as if the global architecture that was established after World War II, in many ways, led by the US, everything from NATO to the UN system, the international financial organizations, the trade regime—that entire structure is crumbling because of efforts led by the US. Do you see it that way? And if so, is this something that is temporary—can be rebuilt—or is the entire structure, is the entire edifice coming down?

Tony Blair 01:06

Well, first of all, hello everyone. It's great to be here with you at the Milken Institute. Thank you very much, Nick. Thank you for the very—Americans are so polite because they could—like to call me prime minister still. You know, I like that. I think—we should bring that to the UK. I don't think so. So crumbling is a strong word, right? The Soviet Union crumbled. Empires have crumbled. What has happened is that everyone's been shaken out of their comfort zone. And when I'm talking to leaders around the world today—my institute works in almost 50 countries in the world—what I say to them is, you can't be sure how this turns out, but everything you should have been doing, you

should do anyway, but better, further, and faster. And secondly, what you're hearing, the noise from the political undergrowth is the frantic foraging for options, right? People are rethinking their position in the world and their relationships. I think we've got a number of big tests as to how this all turns out, because there's no doubt at all, it is a major shock. This is the most significant geopolitical event that I can remember in terms of America and its position in the world. But you've got three big things coming up: you've got how trade works out in the end, you've got the Ukraine conflict, you've got the Middle East. These are all things that will give us indicators, I think, as to what will happen. So is this going to be a shaking up of everyone? Which is not, you know, altogether negative. I mean, Europe, for the first time, is having to think, how do we build our own defense capability and take more responsibility for ourselves? When I was in Africa recently, a lot of African leaders were saying, "OK, we now know that the old order is gone, there's a new order. But let's think about how we make the best of our own world." And in trade, for example, Africa only does 15 percent of its trade between themselves. So this "shaking people out of their comfort zone" is not necessarily a bad thing, but are we going to settle down to what you might call an adjusted new normal, or is this going to be a permanent upheaval? You know, I tend to the first view frankly, but we will see.

Nicholas Kristof 03:39

You mentioned Europe's need to address its defense capability. I mean, one of the silver linings, if one were desperate to find one, would be that Europe is now talking seriously about improving its capacity, although it's very, very hard to see how it can match US lift capacity and NATO intelligence capabilities. Do you think that Europe actually will get its act together over the coming decade, in ways it will make it a credible—create a credible deterrent?

Tony Blair 04:08

Yeah, so that's a big question, and frankly, there'll be many people skeptical about whether Europe can do it. But if you look at what's happening in European politics, there's also enormous change in upheaval there. And I was in the European Parliament just a few weeks back, it's a different parliament. There's different leadership emerging in Europe today, and it's got two big tests. Number one, is—there is a—something called the Draghi report, done by Mario Draghi on European competitiveness. Will they do it or not? They say they're going to, so let's see, OK. And the second thing is on defense, and you're absolutely right. At the moment, there is a complete dependence on the US, for intelligence, for surveillance, for reconnaissance, strategic lift, suppression of enemy, air defense systems. There's a whole set of—a slew of things that Europe does in terms of logistics and capabilities that would need to be massively upgraded. Will they do it? All I can say is that I think, as a result of what is happening, Europe is thinking about this in a different way than I have seen in recent times. I actually began European defense as a concept about 25 years ago, and the reason was, I'd just been through the Kosovo conflict in the Balkans, and we had saved Kosovo from the ethnic cleansing that was happening there. When I came to the end of that conflict, I remember having the conversation with the European leaders and saying to them, 90 percent of the assets were American. If we hadn't had and—thanks to Bill Clinton—we did have an American president willing to commit, we could never have done this, and yet it was in our own backyard. So I think there are questions being posed to the rest of the world at the moment that you know, maybe they should be posed, and maybe it's going to be a question of whether other people can show the leadership in order to demonstrate we know what we have to do, and people do know what we have to do, and now we're going to have to do it.

Nicholas Kristof 06:17

You referred to Europe as "they" and I'm guessing maybe a dozen years ago, you might have referred to Europe as "we", I don't know, but—

Tony Blair 06:27

It's still "we" for me.

Nicholas Kristof 06:28

It's—it seemed to me, a reflection of the degree—you know, in the US, we tend to think of President Trump's influence as "we" generous. But of course, what has happened in the US is also, I mean, Brexit was, in many ways, it led what happened here. What we see in Germany with AfD, with—in the UK with Nigel Farage, in the Netherlands with Geert Wilders. I mean, this really is a global insurrection, in many ways, against the kind of politics that you represented, that I believe in, and I want to ask you for lessons learned, partly because when—so when I was a university student in Britain, at that point, the Labour Party seemed hopeless under Michael Foot, it seemed utterly unelectable, and you turned it into something that actually, not only was electable, but remained in office for a long time. And so I think for Democrats who are disheartened in the US, or liberal Democrats and Labour parties that are disheartened in Western Europe, what—you've written a book about leadership, so how do these parties actually claw their way back to influence?

Tony Blair 07:50

So I remember when I took over leadership of the Labour Party, we'd lost four consecutive elections. It was a political party, and I remember going to a meeting of all our party activists, and someone got up and said to me, you know, the British people have now voted against us four times in a row. What on Earth is wrong with them? And you know, I feel like this with progressive politics. So when I have conversations here and elsewhere with people, I say, no, I don't want to talk about President Trump, or what's happening in these other countries, or why, you know, so and so won in this country or not. What about us? The fact is, we have—you know, progressive politics is not in the right place, globally, at the moment. It's gone down a whole set of cul-de-sacs around things like, frankly, like identity politics and so on, which is never going to create a proper, unifying political message. And we haven't worked out a modern economic way of looking at the world, which I think, personally, is all about the technology revolution and how you understand it and harness it. And so, you know, where there are issues like immigration and we're not dealing with them? Yeah, you're going to get a populist reaction. And I always say about populists, populists don't invent grievances. They may exploit them, but the grievances are usually real, and therefore you're going to deal with it, whether it's stagnant wages or issues to do with anxiety over cultural change, and so for the progressive side of politics, you know, how did we win? Well, first of all, we were always there in what I would call the common sense position on things like culture. But secondly, we had a strong desire to make change that was radical but also sensible. And the problem always for progressive politics, in my view, is

that the radicals aren't sensible and the sensible people aren't radical, and so what you end up with is a situation where you're either boring or extreme, right, and unbelievably, that doesn't win you an election. So in my view, you know, the single biggest challenge of democracy today is efficacy. You know, it's getting things done. I mean, anyone who's ever been in government knows the toughest thing is to get anything done. And I remember this came home to me when I was in Downing Street and, you know, I'd won a big landslide victory, I was the most powerful person in the country. I thought, you know, if I take a decision in Downing Street, you know something's going to happen. And after about a year, I realized nothing happened. The system just absorbed this pressure for change and somehow killed it off. And if you look at, for example, the rise of President Trump here, I think it's got a lot to do with people wanting things moving. They want action. They want things to go, so you've got to—if you're in serious politics, you've got to understand the appeal of your—of the people on the opposite side of politics, and you've got to respond to it. And you know today, that's why, as I say, my view is the single most important thing that's got the transformative power to change government, to change health care, education, public services, is this technology revolution. How do you understand it, master it, harness it, and use it to change the world, right? Because it is going to be the biggest thing happening, but that's not even a debate my bit of politics is really having at the moment.

Nicholas Kristof 11:20

But let me press you on what that means in terms of immigration, which was an issue you mentioned. And I think if there's any single issue that most explains the rise of political extremism, both in Europe and in America, it may well be immigration. And I've got to say that I'm conflicted. I'm the son of a refugee, and when President Trump, in his first term, separated families, that moved me and I think the Democratic Party to the left. We didn't listen to the American public when they said, "look, that's enough." European liberals didn't listen to their publics who said, "look, that's enough." And yet, I'm not sure that I want to listen to people who periodically spew xenophobia. Angela Merkel, I think, did a great thing for the German economy by admitting Syrian refugees, but now the AfD is in some polls, the most popular political party in Germany. So how—what do we do when our political interests conflict with deeply held values?

Tony Blair 12:20

Well, I think we go, as I would say, to a position of where I think you can unify most people. Look, immigration has done an immense amount for your country, for my country. A lot of the people most prominent in the technology sphere are immigrants. So immigration properly controlled is a good thing, but you have to have controls. And I always say to people, with immigration, if you don't have rules, you'll end up with prejudices. The important thing, therefore, is you've got to—whether people come into your country or not has got to be a decision. And what you learn in government is a lot of immigration is driven by the signals you send, right? And I'm afraid you've got to send a signal that if you come into a country, you come in lawfully, or you don't come in, right. And that is the thing that allows you to unite a belief that immigration properly controlled can be a good thing, with the desire to make sure that immigration doesn't become a grievance amongst the population, and then end up actually disrupting relationships between communities and then you get a whole lot of things getting connected with levels of immigration and crime and lawlessness and so on. And this is happening literally all over Europe right now, and for, if you like, conventional politics, here's the thing, conventional politics has got to be the place of solutions. It

cannot be the place of managing the status quo if you end up being just the managers of the status quo and the status quo is not working for people, they're going to put you out.

Nicholas Kristof 14:05

You mentioned the need for solutions. Let's talk about the Middle East. That's a place that you've invested a lot of time and effort.

Tony Blair 14:13

Start with a simple one, right?

Nicholas Kristof 14:15

And a two-state solution now seems perhaps further away than ever. We have a war in Gaza that is dragging on, more than 50,000 dead, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health. What should we be doing to try to end that war and bring some kind of a future to the Middle East?

Tony Blair 14:39

Okay, so, I mean, I have spent many, many years working on this. My institute's very active in the Middle East, and, you know, I could—I could go into so much detail, we'd be here till tomorrow. But I just want to pick out two things. First of all, the broader picture in the Middle East, to me, is all about a struggle for modernity, whether the states of the Middle East can achieve societies of religious tolerance and economies that are open and connected. And you see this struggle going on in different forms, literally all over the region, and it has its echo back in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where, in my view, it's a very—at one level, it is quite a simple thing to express, although difficult to do. When you have two peoples living side by side in a small piece of territory, and remember, you could fit the whole of Israel and the Palestinian territories into, well, I don't know, New York State, I guess possibly, yeah, so—where you have two peoples living side by side and there is conflict, then one of two things happens, either you find a way of resolving the conflict, as we did in Northern Ireland, finally, so the two peoples there living side by side, but they live peacefully with each other. Or you will find that the stronger one will end up having to sit on the weaker one in order to protect their security. And basically you won't get back to a two-state solution or even a rational discussion about that, because for many people in Israel right now, that discussion looks, frankly, completely unrealistic. You won't get back to that unless you find a way of creating a genuine cultural—not just formal peace—a cultural peace between those two peoples and that for many Israelis, that will be about whether the Palestinian state or entity, whatever it may be, but self-determination for the Palestinians can be done in a way that doesn't threaten their security. And where as it were, that acceptance, both culturally and not just formally, of the state of Israel, means that the two peoples can live side by side with some sense of equity and justice. And I think what has happened in Gaza is so terrible in terms of its impact that this is the place we need to start if we're going to have any hope for the future, it's got to start with Gaza.

Nicholas Kristof 17:32

In the 1980s it seemed—you mentioned Northern Ireland, it seemed impossible that there would ever be a peace agreement there. And then, I mean, frankly, both Conservative and Labour governments showed a remarkable degree of restraint most of the time in Northern Ireland in ways that created that culture that you talked about. And so, it seems to me one of the lessons of that is the importance of restraint. Is that a useful lesson to transmit to the Netanyahu government?

Tony Blair 18:11

Well, the point is, restraint is obviously really important, but the most important thing is to have a framework within which people feel they have the confidence to make peace with each other. And that's why, you know—look potentially, it could be something if you manage to create peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, it would have a huge impact on the whole of the region. I mean, the bigger picture in the region is still the desire to do the bigger deal with Saudi Arabia, America, Israel. But frankly, that's not going to happen unless we can create the circumstances in which people feel that Palestinians are also able to live in peace and security.

Nicholas Kristof 18:56

One of the things that both the Biden administration and the Trump administration have attempted to do is a multi-party deal in which some of the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, would recognize Israel. Israel would start on a path toward a Palestinian state. The US, in turn, would provide security guarantees towards Saudi Arabia and some steps toward a nuclear program. Is that—are there hopes for that kind of a multi-party deal? Is there a ray of hope that we can see there?

Tony Blair 19:31

Well, there is if we understand that how Gaza is ultimately resolved will be extremely important in this. I mean, I don't think any form of words around "Palestinian state." "two state solution"—they're not going to carry any credibility, unless on the ground people see some hope.

Nicholas Kristof 19:53

Let's move on to a—maybe the worst—world's worst humanitarian crisis right now is in Sudan. It's a famine. It's—both the Biden and Trump administrations have called it genocide. And it used to be that when countries announced that a genocide was underway, they felt some obligation to do something about it. That seems much less true today. What can be done to try to save potentially millions of lives in Sudan?

Tony Blair 20:23

Look, I think it's really difficult, and you, since you've written about this and studied it for a long time, you're probably better able to chart a way forward than me, but you've got now millions of people displaced. You've got more people dying in—virtually—there than virtually any other conflict in recent memory. And I think that the other problem that you've got always with these crises is that you need enough international bandwidth for people to focus on it in order to pull the parties together and try and get an agreement as to what a stable government in Sudan looks like. And the problem is you've got the two warring factions at the moment, and frankly, both of them still think they've got a chance of winning outright.

Nicholas Kristof 21:04

The—let's move topics a little bit. One of the things that you did that I particularly admire, when you were prime minister, and it got almost no attention, was that, without there being any particular demand for it, you announced an effort to reduce child poverty by half in the UK, and then you did it, you actually reduced child poverty in half over five years. To the extent that capitalism has been amazingly good at growing pies, but not very good at carving up pies, what are the lessons of—lessons learned from that effort? And what can, you know, what should the US take away from that experience?

Tony Blair 21:53

Well, you know, it's an interesting thing, because we did do that, and we did it by mixture of policies of support for working mothers for—we had a program called Sure Start that gave help to some of the poorest communities, both pre-birth and after birth and for children. And you know, we had a very strong focus on what I call the socially excluded, the people who from generation to generation, their lives are pretty wretched, and [Inaudible] you pass it from one generation to the next, that people don't work, they don't bring up their children in stability and so on. All that's true. But here's the big lesson, because it's something that really motivates me now, in a lot of the work we do with governments. I've come to a very strong conclusion. When I talk to my kids about—or used to when they would vaguely listen to me about life, I would say, look, work hard, play hard, right? That's a good rhythm, right? Then you've got a chance of success. But if you play hard, work hard. No, that's going to fail completely. And the political equivalent, in my view is this: policy first, politics second. The single most important thing, if you're in government, is to work out what the right answer is. And part of the trouble with modern politics is that it's still quite riven by what I think are essentially 20th century ideologies of left and right, and people don't just sit down and work up, well, what is the answer? And the reason why I'm so passionate, for example, about the technology revolution today is not because I don't think there are lots of problems with technology, there are, you know, it's general purpose. Technology can be used for good. It can be used for bad. But this technology revolution, artificial intelligence, particularly, it is going to change literally everything. And so if you're looking for policy solutions, start with analyzing how that can be used to change, for example, your health-care system, right? And if you start with the right answer, and then you shape the politics around it, then you've got a chance at succeeding. But a lot of politics is politics first, policy second. So people end up with a political position, and then they try and make the policy fit round it, and that just doesn't work. So if there's any lesson from that or anywhere else in the world, the countries that do well today, and by the way, the difference between those who succeed and those who fail is in the quality of governance. You know, there is a reason why you can pick out the countries that succeed, and you

realize it's because decisions were taken by governments based often on an analysis of what was right, but often in very difficult circumstances to do. And that is, you know, that's how you make things successful, in my view.

Nicholas Kristof 24:50

We're almost out of time. But I want to—you know, we've covered a lot of grim topics, from humanitarian crises in Sudan, Middle East, the global upheaval. But what gives you hope for this era, for the time ahead? What should we all know that will let us leave this room with a spring in our step?

Tony Blair 25:12

Well, I [Inaudible] spring in your step, but—and thank you for bringing the British weather to California for me. Look, it's very simple what makes me optimistic. First of all, you take a step back and you look at the world. Believe it or not, it's got better, not worse. I mean, hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of poverty. Death rates, for example, from the killer diseases in Africa have all come down. You know, the world's making progress despite everything. But the other thing that really does give me hope is that wherever you go in the world, and I spend a lot of time in different continents, different parts of the world, most people want the same thing, right? They want to be able to raise their family with some stability and some chance of prosperity. They want to know that if they work harder, they can do well and make a life for themselves, and they want the government basically underneath them and not on top of them. And those essential unifying—and they have a sense of compassion towards others, as well as ambition for themselves. So those are unifying human values. And I think that's why, when I take a step back, I think there are no problems that are posed to us that humanity cannot solve with good nature and good sense. But whether that is as a result of my own innate optimism, on anything based on a mild view of reality, I don't know. So there you are, Nick. And your next book is called Chasing Hope.

Nicholas Kristof 26:40

I'm still chasing it.

Tony Blair 26:41

Right?

Nicholas Kristof 26:41

Sometime we'll catch it.

Tony Blair 26:42

Yes, let's hope.

Nicholas Kristof 26:44

Well, thank you very much for that glimpse of hope here, and for your work, both as prime minister and in your post-political career, to help make that hopeful vision a reality in so many countries around the world. Thank you very much for joining us.

Disclaimer: This transcript was generated by AI and has been reviewed by individuals for accuracy. However, it may still contain errors or omissions. Please verify any critical information independently.