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“Somehow the idea of leadership has become fairytales,” says Rory Stewart.

“We’re going to have a no deal brexit, we’re going to launch into a new world because there is still this sort of craving, for a sort of heroic vision that has so little to do with the business of government.” Conservative leadership runner up and Tory MP, Rory Stewart appeared at the Edinburgh International Book Festival today appearing at an event chaired by author and journalist, Charlotte Higgins.

The topic quickly turned to Brexit and whether or not Stewart could see another attempt to become Prime Minister in his future. “It’s a very, very difficult question,” he said, following it up with, “I believe very strongly in compromise. So, I believe the solution to the Brexit situation was a soft Brexit, the sort of pragmatic, moderate Brexit, where we’d leave the political institution but remain very close to Europe economically.”

“The reason why I believe this is that I’m very, very worried about polarisation. I’m very worried that if we either go for a no deal Brexit, or reverse the referendum and go for remain, we’re going to end up with forty years of a country split right the way down the middle, but I lost that argument very strongly and indeed the withdrawal agreement which I was arguing for, for a soft Brexit, has now been rejected again and again and again. So I’m now actually in a situation as a politician where I don’t really know what I’m supposed to be saying.”

Stewart came in fifth in the Conservative Party Leadership contest this year, losing to Boris Johnson. Stewart agreed that the ‘cult of celebrity’ that saw Donald Trump take the American presidency may have also played its part in that contest.

“I think the general phenomenon is clearly there. I mean, quite clearly, one of the things that made him so successful is that he was a celebrity. Just much much more famous than anyone else. I mean, when we did the polling, the major reason that he out-pollled the rest of us is that he is the only person anyone had heard of.

Charlotte Square Gardens, Edinburgh

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“Something like ninety percent of the population knew who he was, whereas barely forty- fifty percent knew who Jeremy Hunt was, and so that’s a huge advantage before you begin. So one of the great things that Trump has, or a comedian in the Ukraine has, is just celebrity. Just being more famous.”

When questioned about the current state of the Union and specifically about the increasing calls for Scottish Independence from Scottish nationalists, Stewart doesn’t believe that a battle driven by nationalism is beneficial for anyone and that he hopes that the country remains united. “For me, the United Kingdom represents complexity, compromise trade-offs, it’s arguments against over-simplification. In the end, nationalism remains reductive. It always involves reducing the size of a country. It always involves pretending that there is a big, simple solution.”

He went on to say that nationalism, in his opinion, often seeks to divide a troubled spot and essentially create a tourniquet for issues that a larger population don’t want to see or address, ignoring the “mess and complexity”, while he says that, “the mess of complexity is what makes us. It’s reaching out, it’s embracing. It’s being tumultuous chaotic country that contains Glasgow and London, that contains The Highlands and Devon. That has that tension between the Scottish and English and Welsh and Northern Irish. That’s actually what makes us. Without that, we become terribly boring, terribly reduced as an enterprise.”