

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 9TH JUNE, 2019, MICHAEL GOVE

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MICHAEL GOVE, MP

Environment Secretary

AM: Michael Gove's pitch for the top job is that he's a convinced Brexiteer. A leading light of the referendum campaign but also a sophisticated negotiator who to wants to avoid a no deal exit. Now this morning there are certain other issues hanging over his campaign, but we're going to start by asking the Environment Secretary about his Brexit campaign and he's with me now. Now last time round when you were standing for Prime Minister it didn't end terribly well. What's different this time round?

MG: Well I'm ready now. Ready to be Prime Minister on day one. I have the experience in three senior government offices of delivering. Delivering sometimes against the odds and delivering with a sense of pace and urgency. And I've outlined a clear Brexit plan. I think the clearest and not comprehensive of any of the candidates in order to secure a good deal that honours the referendum result.

AM: Well let's talk about that plan. Under Michael Gove when will we leave the EU?

MG: At the earliest possible opportunity.

AM: What does that mean?

MG: It means that I would have a smart negotiating team led by myself and other politicians rather than officials, explaining to the European Union what needs to change in order to make sure that we honour the referendum result. We would have a full stop to the backstop, we would also have a clear approach to making sure that we had a Canada style free trade agreement.

AM: I'll come to details later on. Almost every other candidate is very clear that we will leave come hell or high water on the 31st of October. You have been rather different. You've said, if it's going to stop us getting the deal we want we would delay beyond that

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date. And you've allegedly told colleagues that you could delay until the end of next year. Is that true?

MG: I wouldn't delay until the end of next year but I think there is a clear choice here.

AM: So how long would you delay for?

MG: There's a clear choice here. If we're on the cusp of a good deal, if we're making progress, which I believe we will in our negotiations, we're 95% the way there on October 31st. Would it really make sense to junk that progress and to say tell you what, we're leaving without a deal anyway. I'm very worried, that if any Prime Minister did that, that the House of Commons would say, well we're on course for a deal, now you're going for no deal, we don't have confidence in your government. And that government losing a vote of confidence would precipitate a General Election and we could have Jeremy Corbyn in Downing Street by Christmas. I think that is an irresponsible risk. We must deliver Brexit before the next General Election because we must stop Jeremy Corbyn and Nicola Sturgeon in Number 10 Downing Street ruining this country.

AM: So before 2022 is your absolute deadline?

MG: My view is that we should leave before October 31st, but if we need a few extra days or weeks in order to dot the Is and cross the Ts to get us out of the European Union, that is the right thing. We cannot take the risk – we cannot take the risk, Andrew, of not delivering Brexit before the General Election because the real danger to our future and our prosperity is Jeremy Corbyn.

AM: But the General Election isn't till 2022. I'm asking you, could under Michael Gove we'd still be in the EU early next year?

MG: No. We want to make sure that we get a –

AM: So it will be definitely this year?

MG: We want to make sure that we get out at the earliest possible opportunity. And the real danger, as you say –

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AM: Those are words that don't help in a sense, the earliest possible opportunity. What does that mean?

MG: I've been clear, weeks or days after October 31st if we're on the cusp of a deal. But the other thing is you say that there won't be a General Election until 2022. We've heard from Barry Gardiner about the desire of the Labour Party to trigger a vote of no confidence if we face no deal. In those circumstances there is a real risk, which nobody can discount, that we would lose that vote of confidence and whoever is leading the Conservative Party, whoever is leading the Conservative Party in a General Election before we deliver Brexit would lose. It is not enough simply to believe in Brexit. You have got to be able to deliver it.

AM: So what do you say to your colleagues who say well there's an obvious answer to this problem. Don't let parliament sit in October. Then we get out, parliament can't stop us getting out, we prorogue. What about that? Dominic Raab suggested that, Esther McVey was saying the same thing on this programme.

MG: I don't think that is the right thing to do. I think that we live in a parliamentary democracy. Parliament must vote in order to ensure that we leave the European Union. My view is that almost everyone in parliament voted to trigger Article 50. There are some honourable exceptions like Ken Clarke. When they voted to trigger Article 50 they voted to say that we are leaving the European Union. MPs must honour that referendum result. But we must also respect the fact that we are a parliamentary democracy. And suspending or as the Constitutional experts call it, proroguing parliament in order to try to get no deal through I think would be wrong.

AM: Do you think it would be wrong because it would drag the Queen into the centre of this controversy?

MG: I think it will be wrong for many reasons. I think it would not be true to the best traditions of British democracy. I argued that we should leave the European Union because I wanted us to take

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back control of our democracy and that means putting parliament at the centre of decision making. I took sacrifices in that campaign, make sacrifices in that campaign in order to secure a restoration of additional powers to parliament and I think it is important that we respect that.

AM: Now you listed the principles behind your Brexit plan and I've read them and I've listened to them and I can't for the life of me see what is really different from what Theresa May tried and failed to do.

MG: Well I would invite you to read it more closely again, Andrew. You're an assiduous reader –

AM: I am.

MG: but one of the things that I would say is my approach to the backstop is distinctively different and my approach to free trade is distinctively different. I believe that there is an opportunity for us to deliver an end to the backstop, a full stop to the backstop and also there's another difference as well.

AM: It's a matter of belief. Can I just put to you –

MG: It's more than a matter of belief. It is a matter of delivery. I have proven in every job that I've been given against the odds that I can deliver.

AM: You've got the chance to renegotiate all of this, you got the chance with to be Brexit Secretary and do all these things and you turned it down.

MG: I explained to the Prime Minister that we needed a chance of approach. The Prime Minister said that she wanted to stick to this approach and I respected her decision and wanted to be – as I've always wanted to be – part of a team delivering Brexit. But it is no secret that at different times I said to the Prime Minister, we need a different approach. And I would take a very different approach as Prime Minister. I've shown that when I am given the opportunity to deliver that I'm ready to deliver, ready to leave.

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AM: So you tell us that you can negotiate a different deal. Let me read you Rory Stewart who maybe more straight forward on all of this. He says: "Any leadership campaign candidate who is pretending that you're going to go to Brussels and get a different deal simply doesn't understand Brussels, hasn't been following the news, doesn't understand that the European position is very, very clear." And you look at everything that they're saying, both the European leaders and the government of which you are part, the British government have said the negotiations are over. There is no more negotiation of the Withdrawal. Simply changing the Prime Minister isn't going to change those facts.

MG: Changing the Prime Minister changes everything. We can get a better deal. The European Union is clear. They don't want no deal either and it is also the case that the European Union know that it would be in everyone's benefits to have a deal that can pass parliament. And I also know from talking to people across Europe that they recognise that change may be required in order to secure a good deal and I will work with those in Europe and also in our own parliament to secure a deal that strengthens the United Kingdom, keeps our union strong and also enables us to enjoy the many benefits of Brexit.

AM: Another big part of your plan is the so called Stormont Lock. You're going to revive Northern Irish politics. Can I put it to you that you are the last person who's going to be able to do that, given your past views on the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Accord which were pretty ferocious.

MG: No. I think I'm the right person to be able to do that, because everybody knows that I'm a Unionist to my bootstraps. You know, Andrew, that one of the reasons why I'm in politics is to strengthen the United Kingdom. You know that I have been very critical of terrorism and separatism in the past. That means that I am in a strong position to command the confidence of the Unionists who are our confidants and supply partners.

AM: That's true, but in terms of –wild language what you said about the Peace Agreement was the following. You've called it 'a moral stain, a humiliation of our Army, police and parliament, a denial of our national integrity, with wickedness at its heart.' And that was part of a 17 thousand page pamphlet. It wasn't a kind of piece of journalism tossed off as we all do, it was a really serious piece of thinking which has not been forgotten in Northern Ireland to this day.

MG: I don't think it was 17 thousand pages. I think it was a slightly shorter work than that.

AM: Words, words.

MG: But the key thing is, yes I was critical of some of the ways in which Tony Blair handled the Peace Process. Yes, I have consistently taken a tough line against terrorism, but it is also the case that we have had now for 20 years the benefits of peace in Northern Ireland and in my current job I have worked effectively with Irish ministers and representatives of the Irish government in order to ensure that the gains of the Peace Process have been secured. I've worked hard in Northern Ireland and in the Republic in order to bring people together during the time that I've been in government and I know what I am ready to deliver a good Brexit deal and also ready to deliver a stronger United Kingdom.

AM: You've talked about your use of cocaine. Do you accept that you committed a crime?

MG: Yes, it was a crime. It was a mistake. I deeply regret it.

AM: Should you have gone to prison?

MG: Well I was fortunate in that I didn't, but I do think that it was a profound mistake and I've seen the damage that drugs do. I've seen it close up and I've also seen it in the work that I've done as a politician and that's why I deeply regret the mistake that I made.

AM: How many times did you take cocaine?

MG: I took it several occasions on social occasions more than 20 years ago when I was working as a journalist.

AM: Was it a habit?

MG: No, I don't believe it was. It was a mistake and it was a mistake that I deeply regret.

AM: Looking at the dates, you were about 30 at the time. You weren't a young man, you weren't a teenager. Did you have any sense then of the damage that this was doing to other kids on the streets of London many of whom may be in prison right now?

MG: I do have a profound sense of regret about it all and I am very, very aware of the damage that drugs do. And as you know, Andrew, I was Justice Secretary. During that time one of the things I said is that people should never be defined by the worst decision that they made. People should be given a chance to redeem themselves and to change and I introduced efforts to have problem solving courts, so that individuals who may have used drugs had the opportunity to change their lives, to make a contribution and I'm very, very conscious of the fact that the mistake that I made is not a mistake I would want anyone else to make.

AM: The crime that you committed the maximum sentence for that is 7 years in prison and or an unlimited fine and again right now there are people who did what you did who are in prison and there are lots of kids basically who supplied cocaine to people like yourself who have either been stabbed or are dead. Cressida Dick, who's Head of the Met. said that people like yourself who have used cocaine on social occasions, middle class parties have blood on their hands. Is she right?

MG: I hugely respect Cressida Dick and one of the things that I would absolutely say is that it is a mistake, which I profoundly

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regret. Absolutely. And one of the things that I also completely agree with is that the drug trade is wrong, that drugs wreck lives and that's one of the reasons why I have sought in office to try to help people to move away from that. Look, I'm very conscious of the fact that I was fortunate. I'm very conscious of the fact that I've been blessed throughout life in many respects. Conscious that right from the moment that I was adopted that I've had good fortune and it's because I know how fragile good fortune can be and because I know about human frailty that I am committed in politics to helping everyone I can. I believe that every life is precious and that everyone has worth and that whatever people have done in the past we should look for the treasure in the heart of every man and try to give people the chance to make a contribution.

AM: When you became a Minister did you tell the government that you had taken Class A drugs? Did you put it on the form?

MG: No one asked. I don't believe that the question was ever raised.

AM: Not on the vetting form?

MG: Not that – I don't ever remember being asked in any way about that.

AM: Including on the ESTA form for travel to the United States?

MG: I don't believe that –

AM: They do ask that question. Have you used class A drugs?

MG: I don't believe that I've ever on any occasion failed to tell the truth about this when asked directly and one of the things of course –

AM: But it would be on the form. I mean you would have to say yes or no and if you'd said yes you could be banned for life from entering the United States.

MG: I think it is the case that if I were elected the Prime Minister of this country then of course it would be the case that I would be

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able to go to the United States. And I think that it's foolish to suggest otherwise.

AM: Let's look at another job that you did, as Education Secretary. On your watch, as I understand it, any teacher caught with Class A drugs could be suspended as a teacher for life. Is that true?

MG: Well, I wouldn't want to get into individual cases.

AM: I'm not asking you, I'm asking about the principle.

MG: No, no, no. But as I say, you know, it's just a case – what we were talking there about people who were using it in the course of their professional life. I made a mistake. I believe that now, as I've explained to you, Andrew –

AM: Did you bring that rule change in?

MG: No, I don't believe so, no. I think one of the things that I did do as Education Secretary is to do everything possible in order to attract the widest range of people into teaching. We improved education during the time I was Education Secretary. 1.9 million more children are in good and outstanding schools as a result of what I did. And one of the things which Esther McVey said earlier with which I profoundly agree is of course decisions that we make in the past we should be held accountable for, but in this election what we are reflecting on is who has the ideas, the vision, the experience in office to be able to lead in the future. And I'm ready to lead on day one.

AM: You have been accused on the front page of newspapers today of hypocrisy about this. When one reads the article that you wrote at the time, that's a fair charge is it not?

MG: No. I think anyone can read the article and make their own minds up. The point that I made in the article is that if any of us lapse sometimes, Andrew, from standards that we uphold, that is human. The thing to do is not necessarily then to say that the standards should be lowered. It should be to reflect on the lapse and to seek to do better in future.

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AM: It's just a lot will be watching thinking about the condition of teachers with Class A drugs or people who are not in your fortunate position, or my fortunate position, whatever it might be, and what happens to them, might feel that this is one law, one standard for people at the top of the tree, like yourself, and a different one for everybody else.

MG: I quite understand that. As I say, I was fortunate at the time – I wasn't a politician at the time, but it was wrong. And I think that in office what I have shown is a determination to help people whatever their background, including at Education and Justice, who may have been born into lives of disadvantage, to lead better lives. And one of the reasons why I want to be prime minister is I value every individual. I think everyone has a contribution to make. And I want everyone to become author of their own life story. To be able to determine their own fate and make a contribution.

AM: Alright, let's turn to something else that you said in the not too distant past when you were describing Boris Johnson on the last leadership contest, and you said he didn't have the grit, he didn't have the focus, effectively he didn't have the character for the top job. Have you changed your view on that?

MG: Well, I'm a – I like Boris very much. And I enjoyed working with him. But when Boris comes on your programme, as I hope he will, you can ask him about his plans and his vision. I'm here to talk about my plans and my vision –

AM: Sorry, to interrupt but –

MG: No, no, no...

AM: It's important for people watching, you know, they might want Boris Johnson or yourself as their next prime minister. This is a matter of real public moment. What kind of character is he? Could he cope with the top job? You have said in the past no, effectively he couldn't. I'm asking, as somebody who has observed him as Foreign Secretary, who has known him for a long time, have you changed your mind about that or not?

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MG: I'm not going to talk about any of the other candidates. You'll have a chance to interview them, the public will have a chance to see them, I hope, on the BBC's television debate next week.

AM: Which you will come to.

MG: Oh, of course. And I hope every candidate does. Because we saw in the 2017 general election, when we didn't participate at the highest level in television debates and we didn't subject ourselves to that scrutiny, that was an error. I hope all the candidates will. I will have an opportunity to outline my economic plan that puts business at the heart of the revival of Britain and will reform taxation and regulation in order to generate wealth, particularly for the most disadvantaged parts of the United Kingdom.

AM: There's a very strange vestigial announcement this morning from your campaign, which is that you're going to get rid of VAT, which raises 139 billion pounds. A huge, huge tax. Six per cent of the entire economy. And replace it with a sales tax.

MG: Yes.

AM: What sales tax, at what rate and when will we know?

MG: Well, one of the things I'd want to do in an early budget and an early comprehensive spending review is to look to see how we can have the tax regime which is the most pro-business in the world. And one of the ways we can do that is getting rid of the bureaucratic model of VAT to a much more flexible and lower tax regime.

AM: We've run out of time. Michael Gove, thanks very much indeed for talking to us.

(ends)