

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 23<sup>RD</sup> JUNE, 2019 – CAROLINE FLINT, MP

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 23<sup>RD</sup> JUNE, 2019

CAROLINE FLINT, MP

Labour

AM: This week Jeremy Corbyn tilted his policy more towards a European referendum, that's what we've heard, exciting many in his own party. But inevitably angering pro leave MPs. We've already heard about the letter. One of the 26 signatories is the Don Valley MP and former minister, Caroline Flint who joins me now. Caroline Flint, I saw you roaring with laughter behind Mr Miliband there..But this is a letter which sounds fairly menacing towards Jeremy Corbyn. You're saying this must happen, this must happen, this must happen. 26 names at the bottom, that's a lot of Labour MPs. Is this some kind of coded threat?

CF: No, not a threat. I think the 26 Labour MPs who signed that letter – there are many others who privately shared their concerns with me – have been saying the same thing for a long time now. We won a situation in 2017 where we didn't win the election but we returned better than we thought and we did so on the promise of respecting the referendum and working to get a good deal. And those of us who signed this letter, and others, believe that we should respect that promise. And that is what has been Labour Party policy and that is what has meant to have guided us through parliament.

AM: For those people watching who haven't read the letter yet, here is a relevant extract, the crucial extract:

"Brexiteers must happen," you say. "The UK must leave and do so without further undue delay. A commitment to a second referendum would be toxic to our bedrock Labour voters."

CF: Correct.

AM: Correct. I suppose one of the questions out of that is are you not likely to lose more seats to the Lib Dems than to anybody else if you don't go in the other direction?

CF: No, not at all. I mean when you look at the polling based on present figures it is clear that for example in David's seat in South Shields that he used to represent, that would go. All the seats in Sunderland, all the seats in Barnsley. Across Wolverhampton, across Stoke and many more. And those Labour leave voters are likely to go to the Brexit Party. So the danger for the party – and this isn't just about an electoral calculation –

AM: How many seats would Labour lose do you think to the Brexit Party if you go ahead in a second referendum direction?

CF: Well, one of the polls suggest it's something like 40 plus. So the thing – and also to the Tories as well in that mix, but we would be losing in our heartland seats. And this isn't just about, you know, electoral advantage; this is actually going to the heart of what the Labour Party is about. If we do not speak for the working class voices of Britain then what's the point of a Labour Party?

AM: Can I ask you a little bit more about this letter, 'cause 26 Labour MPs, as I said and you say you've been speaking privately to more than 26. Is this a block of Labour MPs who would now vote for a deal if a deal comes back?

CF: I think those people who signed the letter would like to still have the opportunity to vote on a deal, and don't forget that when Theresa May was finally forced to stand down we were in discussions about what the Withdrawal Agreement would be like and changes to the political declaration. But I think it's also about us basically trying to be heard in the Parliamentary Labour Party and elsewhere about real concerns about what our party's all about, but also the people that we speak for in our constituencies. And that hasn't been given, I think, the due respect that it deserves.

AM: Last time round I think only 3 Labour MPs were still voting for the Theresa May deal, of which you were one. Now that we are

that much closer to a no deal exit and a different Tory Leader, do you think that number is bound to go up by a considerable margin?

CF: I think it will go up, but you know, I've been through this situation many times before. I believe that the only way to stop no deal is to support a deal and for us to have an orderly Brexit. And the only way to do that is to support a deal. So I am, despite everything that's going on, I am still optimistic and hopefully that parliament will do the job.

AM: If I was Boris Johnson or Jeremy Hunt and had won the Conservative Leadership, an unlikely thought, the first things I would do is go to Brussels to try and get some kind of alteration or change of some kind with the Withdrawal Agreement, and the second thing I would go and talk to Carolyn Flint and the other people who've signed that letter and say, in those circumstances can I rely on your vote? Because if the answer is yes and you overwhelm the relatively small number of hardcore committed Tory remainers and therefore the deal could finally get through and the country could avoid no deal, in order to avoid no deal would you talk to a Johnson or a Hunt or whoever?

CF: I would talk to anybody to stop no deal from any party. And actually I think the underlying point which you make, Andrew, which is correct, whoever becomes Tory Leader the truth is they need to get behind a deal.

AM: And they need a parliamentary majority?

CF: Yes. And they need a parliamentary majority, so whether it's Jeremy Hunt or Boris Johnson they need to get behind a deal. I do believe, as I think Rory Stewart indicated during earlier hustings where he played a part, that essentially elements of the deal we have already got on the table so to speak will still be going forward. There may be some slight changes. The fact that we are having a new Prime Minister in EU language is an event, so that might open the door to some more discussions. But I think we are at a stage now that we really need to consider the health of the

nation. I think the health of the nation needs us to agree a deal and move on.

AM: So the next Prime Minister going to Brussels and thinking about trying to get a deal can, as it were, bank or at least hope for up to 26 Labour MPs in the voting lobbies when push comes to shove?

CF: Well I don't think anybody should bank on anything in this game that we are playing and it is being treated by some quarters as a game which isn't helpful, but I think yes. I think anybody who is going to be the Tory Leader should think about how they reach out, not just to individuals like myself and the other 25 who signed that letter, but also again to the Labour Party. Because even in the Peterborough by-election, Andrew, our message in our scripts to voters, particularly those where we people were thinking of voting for Brexit was once we have Brexit this candidate won't offer you anything on the issues of NHS jobs and so on. That indicated to me that there is still within the party leadership an acknowledgement that actually Brexit is going to happen and I've wanted to get onto those issues of the NHS and jobs. Because at the moment we're not getting a hearing on those matters either.

AM: Similarly, reading my way through the letter and the quote I put on the screen just now, I take it that those 26 MPs would vote against a second referendum is there was another vote on the subject in the House of Commons?

CF: Oh I think that is pretty clear and because we do believe that you know, it's not democratic to ask leave voters to vote twice to prove themselves, but also look, we have to respect democracy, I think we have to bring the country together, I think out there outside the buzz of Westminster and outside the media, there are both leave the remain voters who want to see progress being made. And let's get to the second stage where some of the real deals and the real negotiations will have to take place.

AM: So this is a really big political moment actually because what this suggest is that it's much less likely that we have another referendum and it is likelier that we have an agreement of some kind before we leave the EU?

CF: I very much hope, Andrew, that is the outcome. I believe parliament has not served the people in the way it's gone about this business over the last thousand days. And there have always been, as I've said, hard line Brexiteers and remainers for who no deal was ever going to be good enough.

AM: And you would vote with Boris Johnson and against Jeremy Corbyn to make that happen?

CF: I would vote for a deal, a deal that has the support of the EU 27 and the government if I felt it ticked the boxes that I voted for a deal before. And I voted twice or a deal before. But let's be clear about this. Boris Johnson has also been in the Chamber voting with Jeremy Corbyn as had Jacob Rees-Mogg when I haven't been. So we've all been in a situation where we've been in the lobbies with Boris, the question is why are we in the lobbies, what are we voting for and I voted to leave with an orderly Brexit.

AM: Absolutely fair point. One last question. If right up against the end of the process and despite everything you hope there isn't a deal, do you go with a no deal exit or no Brexit?

CF: I won't be voting to revoke Article 50.

AM: So that means a no deal Brexit if that's what has to happen?

CF: If that is where we end up that is where I will be.

Ends