

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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SIMON COVENEY

AM: Simon Coveney is the Foreign Minister and Tanaiste or Deputy Prime Minister of the Irish Republic and he's with me now. Simon Coveney, welcome.

SC: Thank you for having me on, Andrew.

AM: Can I ask you first of all whether you are prepared to shift at all on this very vexed question of the backstop?

SC: Well, I mean, the straight answer to that is that the backstop is already a compromise. It's a series of compromises that was designed around British red lines. So I mean, don't forget initially it was an agreement between the EU and the UK that there was a need for a fallback or insurance mechanism to reassure people in Northern Ireland. When the EU then designed what became known as the backstop on the back of that political commitment more than a year ago the British Prime Minister said she didn't like it and she needed it changed. And so it was redesigned. It was Britain who actually asked that the backstop would be UK-wide on customs in terms of creating this concept of a single customs territory. It was the UK that insisted on review mechanisms for the backstop so that it could be changed or removed if everybody agreed to that. And the very need for the backstop in the first place was because of British red lines that they wanted to leave the Customs Union and Single Market as well as the European Union. So the Irish position is, look, we have already agreed to a series of compromises here, and that has resulted in what is proposed in the withdrawal agreement, and Ireland has the same position as the European Union now, I think, when we say that the backstop, as part of the withdrawal agreement, is part of a balanced package that isn't going to change.

AM: It's not going to change, but it is now dead. I mean, the withdrawal agreement with the backstop was defeated by 230

votes, the government down to a historic defeat in the House of Commons. That withdrawal agreement as it is, is dead.

SC: No, Andrew, that's not true. What was defeated in the House of Commons was her refusal to ratify a package which involved the withdrawal agreement, which, yes, includes the backstop, but also a future relationship declaration. And so it's the balance of the two of those things that I think we need to be looking at now. You know, if you look at the withdrawal agreement it's actually not that controversial. It's about protecting citizens' rights, British citizens across the EU; it's about a financial settlement; it's about creating the time and space for a transition period for politicians and businesses to prepare for new realities. And it's about protecting a peace process which I believe the Prime Minister is deeply committed to. And even three weeks ago, on your show, she made it very clear why there was a need for a backstop, because we can't talk about not wanting border infrastructure without actually providing the practicalities that make that real. And that's what the backstop is about. The problem with arguing against the backstop is that nobody yet who argues against that insurance mechanism – which may, by the way, never be used if the future relationship is comprehensive enough to avoid it - but the problem with the argument is that nobody has come up with a pragmatic, sensible and legally sound way of avoiding border infrastructure re-emerging between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. And that is why it took two years to get the backstop agreed, and that is why I believe the Prime Minister is correct when she defends it.

AM: You say that, but let me read you what Michel Barnier said earlier this week. He said: 'if there's no deal we will have to find an operational way of carrying out checks and controls without putting back in place a border. My team have worked hard to study how controls can be made paperless or decentralised.' There is an answer to the question about avoiding an Irish border

by the EU itself. If that is true, there is no need for the backstop, surely?

SC: Well, that isn't actually what Michel Barnier was saying.

AM: I read his very words.

SC: Yes, what Michel Barnier was saying there is if we don't have a backstop then the EU, Ireland and the UK will have to work together to try and avoid border infrastructure. But that will not be easy. There is no magic solution here for this problem. If there was it would have emerged by now. And that is why Ireland will insist on the United Kingdom keeping its word, both to Ireland and to the EU and to the people in Northern Ireland, in terms of protecting a fragile but hugely valuable peace process. Don't forget Brexit is not an Irish policy. These are decisions that have been taken by the UK that are causing huge problems on our island, north and south, and there is an obligation on people to actually have pragmatic solutions here rather than wishful thinking in relation to border infrastructure.

AM: I understand that, but we are where we are. To be absolutely crystal clear, if the House of Commons votes next week to remove the backstop from the withdrawal agreement and to find alternative arrangements your reaction will be that the withdrawal agreement is in effect holy text and cannot be touched?

SC: Well, I mean, that is like saying to Ireland that we are not now going to follow through on our commitments to a negotiated and sensible way forward to prevent border infrastructure re-emerging in any circumstances, and insurance mechanisms - no, just let me finish, Andrew - and we're going to replace it with an aspirational hope and a commitment that somehow we'll solve this but we don't know how. Is it reasonable to ask people north and south in the island of Ireland to actually move ahead on that basis? I don't think it is, and I don't believe the EU will support that approach at all.

AM: And therefore, again to be clear, you don't think the EU or the Irish government would accept a British escape clause from the backstop or a time limit to the backstop?

SC: Well, there is already a review mechanism for the backstop, that if there are sensible ways of providing the same solutions that the backstop provides – if it's ever triggered – then there are mechanisms, and you know, people keep talking about games of chicken here and the UK position being against the Irish or the EU position. We're all trying to work together here. Britain and Ireland are two islands next door to each other and we have an extraordinary history together. At times a very tragic history. But we have to work out these things together and stop talking about games of chicken. We've had two and a half years of negotiation. We have a withdrawal agreement, we have a future relationship declaration, there are ways of resolving these issues, in my view, by changing the aspirations within the future relationship declaration, which in my view will reassure people that the backstop is never likely to be used. That is the way in which I hope these negotiations will go rather than the British parliament deciding on something that may command a majority in Westminster but has no chance of getting agreement or ratification in the European Union. I mean, listen to what people are saying in Europe. This isn't just about Britain's future, it's about our future together, the UK and the EU, separate but at the same time working together in our combined interest. And the European Parliament will not ratify a withdrawal agreement that doesn't have a backstop in it. It's as simple as that.

AM: And as I understand it you're ruling out an extension – a time limit to the backstop and a unilateral British escape clause to the backstop. So I'm running through the various options people here have talked about. Another one is a separate individual treaty between the Republic of Ireland and the UK to resolve the Irish border issue. What about that?

SC: But Andrew, with respect, you're talking about this as if we're starting a negotiation again. We've had two years of negotiation. Sorry, all of these issues were debated and discussed and argued when actually we were putting the withdrawal agreement and an Irish protocol into that withdrawal agreement together. These issues, we teased through them in great detail. And your prime minister signed up to the backstop as a compromise which was designed around her and Britain's red lines. And now you're saying, well, actually, you know, we will accept the withdrawal agreement as long as we take out the compromises that Britain was willing to make, but not the compromises that the EU was willing to make. That's a wholly unreasonable position.

AM: A few moments ago you mentioned, quite rightly, the question of the hard Irish border. We are now all heading towards a no deal exit, it seems. In those circumstances your own prime minister said that if things go wrong with the deal thing, 'the border could look like it did 20 years ago, involving customs posts, people in uniforms, cameras, possibly a police presence, or an army presence to back it up.' Can I ask you what uniform that army would be wearing?

SC: Look, what my Taoiseach and prime minister, as people in Britain will understand it, said was he was asked to describe what a hard border looks like. And he described it to remind people what things were like 20 years ago. We cannot and should not be proposing going back there again. And so what I would ask people to think about is how far we've come in the last 20 years, what a peace agreement called the Good Friday Agreement and Belfast Agreement and the 1988 Agreement, whatever perspective you come from, what that has done for relationships between our two islands. Let's not go backwards now and cause tension, and let's listen – now, this is really important, this doesn't happen enough in my view on the British media – let's not listen just to one political party's voice from Northern Ireland because they happen to sit in Westminster. Let's listen to what everybody in

Northern Ireland is saying, what business people are saying, what farmers are saying, whether they're unionist or nationalist.

AM: That's a very fair point.

SC: There is a strong view coming from Northern Ireland which says look, we have a withdrawal agreement here that protects the peace process and good relations on the island of Ireland. Let's take that rather than risk a no deal Brexit.

AM: That's a very fair point, but in these very, very serious circumstances, if parliament votes for an extension to Article 50 and comes to Ireland saying will you back an extension to Article 50? – in these circumstances, in a word, yes or no?

SC: Yes. I mean, Ireland won't be an obstacle to more time if that's needed. Look, Ireland –

AM: I understand that. We're out of time. Thank you very much indeed for talking to us.

(ends)