ANDREW MARR SHOW
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MARY LOU Mc Donald

AM: Can I ask you first of all about something you said, I think, this week. I should explain, the border poll is Irish-speak for a referendum on a united Ireland, and you said you think the time is now. Why do you say that?

MM: Well good morning Andrew, and you’re right, the border poll or the referendum on Irish unity is a provision of the Good Friday agreement. Your viewers will know that there was a common resolution on the part of the British government, on the part of Europe, certainly from the Irish side, to protect that agreement in all of its parts. That’s why a backstop or a set of very specific protections were landed on. They’re minimal, but they’re the absolute bare necessities to ensure that our economy, that our society, and crucially that our peace agreement isn’t disrupted.

From an Irish perspective, as we watch now, as the Brexit drama comes to a climax, we can only accept that there is a possibility, if not a probability, of a hard Brexit and a crash. And in those circumstances we believe that the level of disruption and damage to the island of Ireland would be such that don’t imagine that we will philosophically take it on the chin and just carry on regardless. We believe, in those circumstances, that we go back to the Good Friday agreement and put simply if the border in Ireland cannot be mitigated, if it cannot be managed in the short term, well then you put the question democratically in the hands of the people and allow them to actually remove the border. Bear in mind, Andrew, that people in the north of Ireland did not consent to Brexit. In fact they voted to remain.

AM: So, to be absolutely clear, a hard Brexit would lead inevitably and ineluctably to a poll on the reunification of Ireland. So we’ve got that far. Can I put to you what the Tanaiste Simon Coveney said about this is December, talking about yourselves in Sinn Fein,
he said, ‘this is a hugely unhelpful intervention for party political reasons, which creates more tension on top of that which is already a very tense and divisive debate in the north and at Westminster.’

MM: Well, unlike the Tánaiste, I am the leader of a party that is truly national. In other words, we represent people from the four corners of Ireland. We have elected representation north and south, including, as you said, seven members elected to Westminster and I am absolutely in agreement with the Tánaiste. In fact, there is absolute consensus across Irish society and Irish political life as to the necessity of the backstop. It is the bottom line. The Tánaiste is quite correct to say that. However, where we have a difference of opinion or a difference of timing is on the issue of the border poll or the referendum. And let me say this: there’s no point in us burying our heads in the sand and imagining or trying to wish away a hard border or a hard Brexit. Should those things come to pass, the Irish state and the Irish people need to be prepared to deal with them. I should also say Andrew, that in our view we’re en route to constitutional change in this country anyhow, and a referendum. It’s not entirely dependent on Brexit, but I take the very pragmatic view that we prepare for the worst scenario and we protect our national interests.

AM: Can I ask you about something related to it, but slightly different, which is everybody on both sides of the Irish Sea seems to assume that a hard border would become a target for violence. We’ve seen a car bomb in Londonderry not too long ago. Why would a hard border attract violence these days?

MM: Well, the border in Ireland, our country’s partitioned since the 1920s. Partition of course was an old imperial retreat tactic, as you know, operated by the British. The border is contested. There are people like me right across our country - we are in fact a majority – who believe that our country should be reunified, that it needs to happen peacefully and democratically. I suppose one of the biggest symbols of the success of the Irish peace process
was the fact that people can now travel absolutely unimpeded and freely north to south. People who live in border communities in particular would attest to that. So obviously any question of apparatus or infrastructure on the border, any controls or checks, any question of British soldiers, for example, or security personnel along the border.

AM: Or Irish soldiers.

MM: Well, I think the Taoiseach has been clear that there won’t be Irish soldiers on the border. Nobody on Ireland will tolerate or accept a hardening or a hard border on our island. It is actually as simple as that.

AM: Do you think there would be violence if that border was put back?

MM: No, I didn’t say that. You put that proposition to me. Let me tell you that the peace process is very solid, very robust, Irish people are very clear that we are only going forward, we are not going back. But let me say this: it would be grossly reckless, grossly irresponsible of the Tories in government or anybody else to play games or to play a game of chicken with that process. And of course there would be a concern that minorities, that certain people might take actions in those circumstances. But let me repeat again, we are resolute on this side of the pond, there will be no hard border, Irish interests will be protected. Peace in Ireland, peace across these islands, is a precious thing, it’s a thing that we have built collectively, and shame on anybody on any side of the argument at Westminster that would play games with that or that would endanger it in any way. And there’s been a lot, if I may say so, hot air and high rhetoric around the backstop. The backstop is a simple technical mechanism to protect our all-Ireland economy and to ensure that that process that we have built together remains intact.

AM: Can I ask you about one other issue, which is I think people understand why Sinn Fein MPs will not take their seats at
Westminster. You regard it as a foreign parliament and an imperial parliament and all the rest of it, and you’ve been very clear with voters we will not take up our seats. But in these extraordinary and unusual circumstances, where things are absolutely on a pivot or a knife edge at Westminster, every vote counts. If you did take up your seats you could have a huge influence on the course of Brexit, and indeed on the course of events in Ireland. Is there any part of you thinks maybe we should revisit this, maybe we should think again about this?

MM: I don’t accept your premise that we would have an influential effect. Seven votes, I don’t believe, would have that effect. And in any event we have no business in your parliament. The parliament at Westminster, correctly, advances and protects what it regards to be British interests. That’s the function of your parliament. We have no business interfering in that. I am Irish. We have not just one parliament, we actually have two parliaments on this island and our job is to advance and protect Irish interests. I have to also say this to you: I look at the experience of our Scottish colleagues and I see them at Westminster and there’s more of them – I think there’s 30-odd members of parliament from Scotland, and I think they would readily attest to the fact that Westminster has no interest really in Scotland either. By my observation, Westminster has never served Irish interests. It’s not constituted or designed to do that. Irish interests are defended in Dublin, in Belfast and have been and will be defended by our partners in the European Union.

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