

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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ARLENE FOSTER

AM: Can I start by asking you about this customs union issue? Have you had any conversations with the Prime Minister about this recently?

AF: Indeed, we have continuous conversations around this issue, and I spoke to the Prime Minister actually just yesterday afternoon about the issue. So yes, we're having continuous conversations.

AM: And as I said, this also affects the Irish border. There are two things on the table: the so-called partnership whereby we would take tariffs and pay them to the EU and then they would pay back in rebates. It's quite complicated but it would keep the Irish border relatively as it is at the moment. And then there's the so-called maximum facilitation version, which is highly technical. I wonder which of those two you prefer.

AF: Well, for our part we want to see for Northern Ireland a very sensible Brexit. What do I mean by that? I mean by that respecting the vote of the British people. In other words, leaving the customs union. But I also mean by that that we don't have what the European Union have put on the table. In other words, a red line down the Irish Sea. What we need to do is to protect the integrity of the United Kingdom, from a constitutional point of view but also from an economic point of view, and that's the important thing for the people of Northern Ireland.

AM: If you had to choose, and I know this is a difficult thing to say, if you had to choose between staying inside the customs union to keep the Irish border open, as it were, and to avoid a border in the Irish Sea, would that be a price worth paying?

AF: Well, I think it's very clear that the British people voted to leave the customs union. That is our position as well. We don't

believe that we have to stay in the customs union to have free flow between ourselves and the republic of Ireland. We believe that there are ways to deal with this, and indeed, back in August of last year, as you know, the government put forward various proposals. We were disappointed there wasn't the engagement from the European Union at that time. They were dismissed out of hand, if you like. What we would like to see from the European Union is less rhetoric and actually more engagement in relation to the pragmatic way forward, not just for Northern Ireland but for the whole nation as well.

AM: I mean, the reason I asked the question is that Nigel Dodds has said that you will at least consider the possibility of staying in the customs union if that was, if Theresa May thought that was the best option.

AF: No, I don't think he did say that actually. I think what he said was that what is most important for us actually, our fundamental red line, is that we have to move in lock-step with the rest of the United Kingdom, that there cannot be any difference, if you like, between us and Great Britain. And why do we say that? We say that because 72 per cent of the goods that leave Belfast port come to Great Britain. Therefore it is vitally important for us that we have that we have that free flow across the Irish Sea.

AM: There's a lot of technological jargon involved in all of this, but the so-called maximum facilitation version means that we track everything going across the borders electronically. And yet I've been told again and again and again there won't be any more cameras, there won't be any more technology on the Irish border. Do you understand how it is possible to track goods coming in and out of Northern Ireland without technology?

AF: Yeah, well, I think it is with technology, but not necessarily technology at the border as such. Because of course there are ways that we can do things online, through trusted traders,

through small business exemption. All of these things were put forward in August of last year.

AM: You still need to recognise number plates, you still need to know who's coming across the border. So whether it's sort of 100 yards into Northern Ireland or 100 yards into the Republic of Ireland there still need to be cameras there, don't there?

AF: Well, we have cameras at the moment obviously, an APR camera system which is there for security reasons. But of course we have – I think sometimes people miss the point that we already have a border in Ireland. It's there because there are two jurisdictions. It's there because we have different VAT rates. We have two different currencies. So already we have to deal with those issues, and I think what we need to do is to get down to the detail and look at this in a pragmatic way that works for businesses and of course works for the people who live on the island as well.

AM Now, of course, this is a negotiation with the EU. You've said that you don't really regard Michel Barnier as an honest broker in all of this, and he has said, apparently this week, talking to MEPs in Brussels, that the DUP has used – or in his words – 'perhaps abused its position in the House of Commons to block the way forward.' What's your message to Michel Barnier?

AF: Well, Michel Barnier was in Ireland last week and came to Northern Ireland we regretted the tone – and I certainly regretted the tone of what he had to say when he was here, because – or rather in Northern Ireland – because what he was saying there was really it was up to the UK to come up with a solution and they would wait for that solution to come. And that's not the way forward. The way forward is to have a negotiation where both sides are engaged in the negotiation and we look for a solution that will make the difference, because it's not only the UK that has to look to the future, the EU 27 have to look for a way forward as well that would be good for them in terms of goods

and services. Of course, in relation to the Common Travel Area, people can have a free flow across the border and that will continue.

AM: Talking about the different versions on the front of Cabinet table at the moment, the different possibilities, as I say, they're both quite complicated and there's been lots and lots of stories saying that we will not actually be ready in terms of the technology till about 2023 for this to happen. What do you think should happen after March 2020?

AF: Well, I think after March 2020 we should leave the customs union, we should respect the vote of the British people, and we should move towards dealing with the issues that are on the table now. I mean, this is a very complex issue and I recognise that, and there is a need to get it right and I think that is the important thing for us. The important thing is to get this right so that our future relationship with the European, with the European Union is one that works for us, of course, but also one that works for the European Union as well.

AM: So it might be possible, it might be the case that we don't have the technology, we're not ready in 2020 to do this, we might have to wait till 2022 or 2023. My question is what should happen in that intervening gap? Should we just extend the transition period until we are ready?

AF: Well, I think we're moving far ahead, Andrew. I think what we need to find out from the Cabinet and from government what is the preferred way forward, and once we have that then we will know further how we reach that preferred way forward. So we're waiting to hear from government, and as I say, we have continuous conversations with the government as to which is their preferred way forward and we look forward to hearing that.

AM: Now, people say of course, and I've said, in a sense, everybody, Theresa May must listen to Arlene Foster because you

can bring down the government at any point. I put it to you that that is an empty threat, because you regard Jeremy Corbyn as beyond the pale and you'll do nothing that will lead to the possibility of a Labour government.

AF: Well, we do think that Jeremy Corbyn is beyond the pale because of his support for the IRA in the past. And as someone that has suffered as a result of IRA terrorism it's a very personal issue for me. But in terms of bringing down the government, we don't need to bring down the government because Theresa May, and this is something –

AM: We're doing it to her anyway.

AF: No, Theresa May, long before she was involved in a confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party, was very clear about her unionist credentials. Actually when she moved into Downing Street, the very day she was appointed Prime Minister she was very clear that she cherished the whole of the union, the four constituent nations, and I think for us that is very important, and obviously flows through into the negotiations with the European Union.

AM: We're 20 years of from the Good Friday Agreement and quite a lot of people, including in your own party, have said it is basically run out of road, it's lived its life and it should be forgotten about now.

AF: No, I don't think that's right. I think if you look at it as sacrosanct and as the only thing that has mattered in the peace process, I think that is wrong. I think that it has been an evolving situation in Northern Ireland and of course there have been other agreements since the Belfast agreement which have been as important to the peace process in Northern Ireland.

AM: Because we've had more than a year now without a government in Northern Ireland, and to a lot of people it seems as if tribalism is returning in a party political sense and that your party hasn't made the necessary gestures to the other side, and

they've been making some gestures to you. The new leader of Sinn Fein talked about Londonderry the other day, which would have been unthinkable from a previous Sinn Feiner.

AF: Well, I don't accept that we haven't made any so-called gestures, and I think it's more important actually to find and to build a basis for a shared community in Northern Ireland, which is what we want to see – a real sharing and not just a gesture sharing. And wouldn't it be good, for example, if Sinn Fein were to allow Northern Ireland's government to sign up in full to the military covenant and to respect veterans regardless of where they live in the UK? And I think that that is something that they could do to show respect for veterans that live in Northern Ireland. So there is much to talk about. We have to build up the confidence again.

AM: What can you give them, what can you do for them now?

AF: Well, I have said frequently that the Irish language is no threat to the United Kingdom, or indeed to the union. I respect people that speak the Irish language. But that's not enough for Sinn Fein, they want to impose the Irish language on everyone in Northern Ireland and I think that that would be not only a retrograde step for Northern Ireland, but actually for the Irish language as well, because it actually politicises it. So I think there is much that we have to do. We have to build up confidence between the parties again, because devolution is right for Northern Ireland and we want to see it return immediately.

AM: One final question. Later this month there's going to be a referendum on liberalising the abortion laws in the Republic of Ireland. If that goes through, if that's accepted, isn't it time for Northern Ireland to do the same?

AF: Well, of course these are matters for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

AM: Which isn't there.

AF: Which isn't there. And we need to have that Assembly to have these sorts of debates. Of course, we are very much a pro-life party, but you cannot have the debate if you don't have the Assembly, and we want to see that Assembly back as quickly as possible.

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