

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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REBECCA LONG-BAILEY

AM: Hello and welcome. Can I ask you, before we get into the nitty-gritty of all of this, what was it actually like? It's an extraordinary moment. A man that Theresa May has reviled as a Marxist, she invites you all in, she talks to you, were there jokes? Were there biscuits? What was it actually like to be there?

RLB: Well, we're in unprecedented times at the moment. But I have to say that they were very good natured discussions. We've been through two meetings now, both good natured and both very technical. And we've had subsequent exchanges with the government. So the overall mood is quite a positive and hopeful one, I have to say.

AM: So Theresa May wasn't simply sitting there giving nothing away at all. She was actually engaging with Jeremy Corbyn. Eye contact, a bit of jokes, that kind of thing?

RLB: I wouldn't go as far as saying that there were jokes, but there was certainly an engagement and a willingness to cooperate on both sides. I mean, the sad thing is at the moment we haven't seen overall any real changes to the deal. But we're hopeful that that will change in coming days, and we're willing to continue the talks, as we know the government are.

AM: I think a lot of us on the outside are still unclear as to the status of these talks. Have there been any contacts over the weekend? And are you clearing time in your diary for these talks to go on tomorrow?

RLB: We are. We're keeping our diary as free as possible. We've had exchanges with the government over the weekend clarifying

out position. They've been setting out theirs. And hopefully, at the beginning of next week we will be having further discussions. But we're currently waiting for the government to come back to us now to state whether they're prepared to move on any of their red lines. As I say, we had great discussions and we went into a lot of technical detail, but so far we haven't seen anything from the government that would suggest they're prepared to change any part of the deal going forward. And obviously that's disappointing because we know the prime minister committed to compromise, and indeed we've committed to the same, but we haven't seen any real compromise yet.

AM: It's slightly confusing, because the Chancellor Philip Hammond has said we have no red lines at all, and suggested that the government is prepared to move. And some of the papers are saying today that the government is offering you, or is preparing to offer you, some kind of agreement on a customs union that will be voted through and become legally enforceable. That's the kind of thing you want, presumably.

RLB: Well, yeah. Time will tell over the next few days. But certainly at present we haven't seen any real changes to the deal. But I think both sides are committed to working quite rigorously to compromise as much as possible so that we can provide that compromise Brexit deal that I think parliament desperately needs at the moment.

AM: You say both sides there, of course quite rightly, what compromises are you offering?

RLB: Well, we've demonstrated already within parliament that we're prepared to be flexible. We had a round of indicative votes recently and there were a number of proposals put forward by backbenchers that weren't our policy position, but in order to move things along we supported them. So the government's

under no illusion that we're prepared to compromise. And we had very, very in-depth discussions setting out our real fears and concerns in relation to the customs union, in relation to the single market and regulatory alignment, in relation to how any of the proposed changes could be entrenched so that a future Conservative leader wouldn't be able to rip up the changes that have been agreed.

AM: Boris-proofed as one paper put it this morning, Boris-proofed.

RLB: Boris-proofed, yes, indeed. (laugh)

AM: Now, the customs union seems to be at the heart of all of this because Theresa May's proposal includes a customs arrangement and it doesn't seem a million miles away from what you're proposing. It's different. Can I ask you, are you insisting on a full customs union labelled as a customs union, yes or no? Or are you prepared to edge a little bit towards her on that?

RLB: Well, a customs union is defined in international law, and the proposals that certainly we've seen from the government so far and their direction of travel over the last two years has not been compliant with the definition of a customs union. And we're trying to get the detail from the government as to where they would be prepared to move to on this. But certainly what we have on the table isn't a customs union. It certainly doesn't meet the criteria that many business organisations, such as the CBI, have been asking for. And it's important to state that the reason we're calling for a customs union is to protect vital supply chains.

Manufacturing particularly. So we can have that frictionless trade, and at the moment we're seeing investment stagnating in manufacturing and huge uncertainty.

AM: So on that you're not compromising. You want a full-fat customs union and nothing less?

RLB: We've explained what our policy position is and the government's under no illusion about that. And we've stated that we want Britain to have a say in future trade deals as part of a customs union arrangement. But we are willing to compromise and we're waiting for the government to come back with their customs union proposals in full. But as I say, at the moment what we've seen doesn't suggest that the position is changing.

AM: Jeremy Corbyn said that he'd raised the question of a second referendum. Can I ask, is the Labour Party's position in these talks to demand another referendum under all circumstances or not?

RLB: We've stated our policy position very clearly throughout these exploratory talks.

AM: But are you asking for one?

RLB: Well our policy asks us to ask for one. Our policy states very clearly that in the event of a damaging deal that could damage jobs and the economy, or a no deal situation, that we should keep all options on the table. And that includes a confirmatory public vote of some kind. So we've asked the government whether they would consider complying with our policy position, and as yet we haven't seen anything to suggest that they will. But as I say, discussions will continue next week.

AM: I'm just thinking that if you press another referendum on Theresa May, that would collapse the talks. She would never accept that. And therefore it might be tactically wise to put that to one side and focus on the customs union. And that seems to be the way that the Labour leadership is thinking.

RLB: Well, ultimately we want to gain a compromise deal that will satisfy a large consensus across parliament. And that's our priority. But of course we're under a duty within our party to set out our policy position, which we have done. The Conservatives have set out theirs. And we're hoping that we will find a compromise. But as I say, the critical outcome from these talks must be some form of compromise deal that will secure a majority in parliament.

AM: Now, if you fail in these talks the next phase of the process seems to be a series of further binding votes in the House of Commons on other ways forward. And the prime minister has said that she would be bound by the House of Commons in the case of these votes next week. Will the Labour Party leadership also be bound?

RLB: Well, we haven't had any discussions really as to what the next stage would be and the government haven't confirmed whether they want to adopt that approach or look at more flexible approaches going forward. Certainly I think we're in the first stage of the discussion process about seeing if we can find that compromise. And in terms of parliamentary business for next week, as I say, I haven't had any indication from either of the whips that indicative votes will be put on the table.

AM: I'm sorry, but this is a position of principle really. The prime minister said on Tuesday that she would be bound by these votes in terms of the House of Commons. It's five days later and you can't say on behalf of the Labour Party the Labour Party would be bound. We're in a position where everybody's going to have to make compromises and moves. I ask you again, if the House of Commons votes for a way forward this week will the Labour Party be bound by that?

RLB: Well, it depends on the options that –

AM: So not. So no.

RLB: - were put on the table. But as I said, Andrew, as I said, in the discussions that we've had so far with the government and agreed position on the next stage, whether we go into an indicative votes situation, whether they're going to be binding, that has not been discussed at length or agreed by either party.

AM: Jeremy Corbyn says that his ultimate purpose in all of this is to stop Britain crashing out with no deal. Now, if this process doesn't work, and it still seems to be pretty sticky, to put it politely, and if those votes aren't binding this week, then we may end up by Friday in a position where we are staring down the barrel of either going out with no deal at 11 o'clock on Friday evening or revoking Article 50. That's the last lever the House of Commons would have left in those circumstances. Would the Labour Party vote for revoke in those circumstances?

RLB: Well, of course we don't want no deal, because we think that it would be extremely damaging for our economy. Various manufacturing organisations have shown us the financial impact that no deal would have on their businesses and it would cause widespread damage and job losses across industry. So we want to avoid that in any situation.

AM: Sorry, if that's the case, then logically you must be preparing to vote to revoke Article 50 at that moment.

RLB: We'll keep all options in play, Andrew.

AM: That is the only other option.

RLB: To keep no deal off the table. And well, we'll have to remember that if we get to a situation where parliament has to

look at revoking Article 50, that will be disappointing and it will be as a result of the crisis that the government has caused, unfortunately. But it will be a matter that we consider very carefully at the time, but we have promised our party members and our constituents that we'll do all we can to avoid a no deal situation, and it's something that we would consider very, very strongly.

AM: Okay, if words mean words, 'all we can' must mean that you would vote to revoke Article 50.

RLB: Well, it's a very hypothetical question. I mean, from a personal position, we know that there's no appetite within parliament for a no deal situation, so we know that if the prospect was put to parliament to avoid a no deal using that as an option, then perhaps it would have a large success of winning (sic). We also know that Europe has largely stated that they don't want to be in a no deal situation. And I'm sure, certainly from the actions and the comments that I've seen coming from Europe in recent weeks, they will do all they can to avoid a no deal situation. And I hope that that does happen. I hope we do avoid a no deal situation and being forced to consider revoking Article 50. Because ultimately our priority this week is to try and negotiate with the government a compromise Brexit deal that will protect jobs and the economy going forward, and we want to be given the opportunity to do that.

AM: It doesn't sound like you're in a very compromising mood, if I can put it that way. You've said that you're not going to move on the customs union and you've said that you're not going to be bound – unlike the prime minister – you're not going to be bound by votes in the House of Commons. I'm slightly surprised that you are not in a slightly more malleable mood because it's a very important moment for the whole country and both sides need to move.

RLB: Let me be clear, we've not said that we won't compromise on a customs union. We've not said that we won't compromise on our position in relation to regulatory alignment and having a strong single market deal. We are willing to be flexible, but we have to see the government move their red lines first. We've outlined our concerns and where we'd like to get to, but equally compromise works both ways, and at the moment we're not seeing any element of compromise from the government. And we're hopeful that will change over the coming days, and certainly we'll consider any proposals that they put to us, if they come near to the objectives that we're trying to achieve.

AM: Well, let me return to those votes in the House of Commons, because again it's slightly odd perhaps for people watching. Theresa May keeps being accused of being one person who won't listen, won't change her mind, won't compromise, and here she is saying if the House of Commons votes for an answer this week I will be bound by it. But the Labour Party is not prepared to match that offer. Why not?

RLB: Well, no, we're not saying that at all. What we're saying is the government haven't provided any outline of what will happen in the second phase. We don't know if there's going to be any business tabled which would allow parliament to have indicative votes, and certainly we haven't had any discussions. And that stage, that second stage was intended to kick in in the event that the compromise talks failed, as far as I'm aware. That's certainly the impression that the prime minister has given to us. So we want to make sure that we do all we can in that first stage to provide a good, strong compromise deal that would provide a consensus within parliament. And then we'd think about the next stage, whether we need to move to an indicative votes process that looks at a number of options going forward. But certainly we're very much in the first phase of those discussions.

AM: Okay, but the second phase could be two days away, or three days away, maximum. And the Labour Party's said again and again parliament really matters, the Commons counts above everything else, and therefore I'm deeply confused as to why you won't accept the verdict of the House of Commons. I can only assume that you're worried that that Theresa May might get her deal through and therefore you might be committed to that.

RLB: Well, no, as I said, whatever the House of Commons votes for will be the final deal, whether that's the deal what we vote on as a compromise deal, whether the prime minister decides to put her deal for a meaningful vote for, you know, etc, etc. So that will be the outcome of the parliamentary process whatever happens. But what I'm saying to you today, Andrew, is that in terms of that second stage, whether the government has agreed to be bound by parliamentary decisions on indicative votes or not, that has not been agreed by either the government or the opposition at this present time. And certainly we haven't moved into that stage of negotiations. We've not had any indication that that's what they're proposing to do this week.

AM: Rebecca Long-Bailey thanks for being face to face with us.
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