THE ANDREW MARR SHOW

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INTERVIEW WITH BRANDON LEWIS MP, CONSERVATIVE PARTY CHAIRMAN

ANDREW MARR: The Tory Party conference wasn’t quite as dominated by Brexit as many expected. The party seems just a little bit spooked by Jeremy Corbyn’s popularity, and Theresa May’s most dramatic announcement was that austerity is coming to an end. Really? The party chairman, Brandon Lewis, joins me from London now. Welcome, Mr Lewis. Was this a real change of policy or was it a conference sound bite.

BRANDON LEWIS: Good morning. Actually, the Prime Minister, I think was very clear, this is looking to the future. Because of all of that hard work and those tough decisions that have been made over the last few years, and the hard work of people across the country, we can now be looking towards what happens next because of those decisions, and that is looking forward into those budgets when we come into 2020 through 2023 as we have the spending review.

AM: Well, let’s look at what’s going to happen next. Is it true that Esther McVey has told colleagues that people being moved onto Universal Credit, hundreds of millions of people, are going to lose £200 a month?

BL: Well, as you move onto Universal Credit, of course, the system itself looks at the individual and comes up with an approach that is holistic to somebody’s needs, I think, and my constituency, Great Yarmouth, was one of the pilots that rolled the housing benefit in as well. So there are changes as people go forward. But as I say –

AM: What’s holistic about losing £200 a month?
BL: Well, as I say, it depends on the individual’s needs. There’s a small percentage of the country this is being rolled out to at the moment. We’re doing this very slowly, very methodically, to make sure we are learning as we roll this out, to get this right. And ultimately if it’s working it’s getting more people back into work in a sustainable way and it’s showing that work does pay.

AM: I said, ridiculously, hundreds of millions. I mean, millions of people, however, are going to be affected by this. Esther McVey has been warning Cabinet colleagues that these are really substantial cuts in what they’re going to get. It’s going to infuriate people across the country and it makes the promise of ending austerity look completely hollow.

BL: Well, actually I disagree with you on that, Andrew. I think what we’ve outlined – and actually even in the Prime Minister’s speech some of the things, for example, removing the borrowing cap on the councils for building houses is a very clear indication of moving forward to a different structure as we go forward. And that’s what we mean by the change and end of austerity. We’re also very clear about the fact we’ve said for Public Sector pay we’re going to look at what those independent panels come back with. We’ve always got to make sure that it pays to work, that we’re making sure we help people get back into work, and do it in a way that is fair for the taxpayer.

AM: Universal Credit appears to be building up as a serious political crisis in this country at the moment. John McDonnell, for the Labour Party, the Shadow Chancellor, has just said that Labour would scrap Universal Credit. What’s your reaction?

BL: I saw what John McDonnell said and actually what he was saying was that he would want to – the idea of having a policy like Universal Credit that puts everything together in one way, that’s simple, is the right thing to do. Of course, he’s not able to outline what Labour would do exactly. What we’re saying, the
reason we think Universal Credit is the right way to go is it does get more people into work. It ensures that work pays. And it’s fair for the taxpayer. So it’s a system that we’re moving to, it’s been a system that’s working as it’s being delivered for people at the moment, and I think it’s the right way to go.

AM: Okay, if we’re ending austerity in this country, are you going to end the freeze of working-age benefits?

BL: Well, what we’ve said with the change and end of austerity, we’ve already given an indicator, as I’ve just said, around looking at what the independent pay panels say, taking away that cap on what councils can borrow in order to build more homes we want to see being built in the future. We’ve committed this extra money, the 20 billion, 394 million a week, I think it is, to the NHS from around 2023. What we’ll see going forward, obviously will be outlined. The Prime Minister’s set that overarching policy agenda, where we want to go, and it will be for the Chancellor as we go forward in budgets over the next few years – and of course in the comprehensive spending review that begins next year – to outline the detail behind that as we go forward.

AM: You’ve mentioned local authorities several times now. They have of course lost 55 per cent of their central government funding since 2010. Are you going to reverse any of that, or are you at least going to freeze the £1.3 billion that’s in the pipeline for them now?

BL: Well, as I just said, Andrew, we have had to make some really tough decisions over the last years. Local authorities have been fantastic at showing how you can deliver more for less right across the country. There are still local authorities, smaller local authorities, who can look at how they share management, share services, commission things together to be more efficient. But as I say, we’ll see as we go through that comprehensive spending review next year, and in the budgets over the next few years the
Chancellor will be outlining the detail that goes behind that overarching position that the Prime Minister outlined on Wednesday morning.

AM: So it’s a kind of ‘one day, someday, perhaps never’ kind of promise. It sounds more like a slogan than a hard thought-through change of direction by the government.

BL: Not at all, Andrew. As I say, in the very speech the Prime Minister outlined an example of this with the removal of that borrowing cap for local authorities. That’s a really big shift and will allow thousands more homes to be built by local authorities who want to provide those homes for people. That goes on top of the decisions we’ve already made. The biggest fiscal injection ever into the NHS, that £20 billion that was announced earlier this year with the 70th birthday of the NHS. And the position we have taken with regard to looking at those independent panels, pay reviews for the public sector, I think is a very clear indicator of what we are already doing, and I think it is quite reasonable and sensible for us to be fiscally sensible and to say that the future decisions around fleshing out the details that go beyond those three huge announcements actually you’ll see as we go through that spending review and in the budgets the Chancellor sets over the next couple of years.

AM: As the man in charge of the Tory Party, are you worried about Jeremy’s Corbyn’s appeal to young voters in particular?

BL: Well, actually I’ve seen a big increase in our membership from young people. We had a record number of people, young people – I do mean genuinely young, under 25 – at party conference this year. Around 20 per cent of all our members attending conference were under 25. That’s a really good thing to see.

AM: The electorate as a whole, if you look at the electorate as a whole, the Labour Party’s making big, big inroads into the
younger part of the electorate. Your voters are older and I know a lot of your colleagues are really worried about the trends.

BL: Well, actually I disagree with you there. Some of the data that came out after the general election showed that some of those claims weren’t actually correct. The average age of our membership is pretty much in line with the Labour Party’s membership. Our younger membership is growing. We’ve got sixty new branches for Young Conservatives around the country. We had a very successful Fresher’s fair campaign. As I say, really strong presence at party conference. That’s a good thing, because we offer really positive options for people in the future: good education, good job opportunities, they come from Conservative-led policies.

AM: Let’s turn to Brexit. Do you also think that we’re close to a deal?
BL: Yes, I am confident actually the Prime Minister will come back with a deal, one that delivers for the United Kingdom, for our future economy, and importantly, delivers on the referendum itself, getting back control of our borders, control of our money, control of our laws, and in a way that, as I say, works for our economy and of course for our partners in Europe as well, so we can continue to have a really good, strong future trading partnership.

AM: To get to deal, to get that partnership, are you prepared, is the party prepared, to see further regulatory checks as in Great Britain and Northern Ireland?
BL: We’ve got a very clear policy on the table. We’ve outlined through the White Paper how we think this can work, that does deliver on the referendum and in a way that gives a really strong free trading agreement, as I say, with what is arguably the biggest trading block in the world, our partners in Europe. I think
the Prime Minister will get a deal that delivers on that and bring that back to Parliament in the next couple of months.

AM: That is absolutely not my question, Brandon Lewis. Would you be prepared to accept further regulatory checks between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK or not?

BL: Well, the difference between my answer and your question, Andrew, is you’re working in hypotheticals. I’m being very clear about the facts. There is one clear plan on the table, that’s the one from the government. As the Prime Minister said, Europe has got to come back to us on that. I think that’s a deal that works and that’s a deal we’re focused on getting.

AM: Well, you can call Arlene Foster many things, but you can’t really call her hypothetical. And she has said this is her blood-red line. Can you reassure her in any way this morning?

BL: Yes, in the sense we’ve been very clear from the beginning to everybody that we will – and no Prime Minister would want to see any change in the structure of the United Kingdom. Our promise has been very clear: that we will ensure that we get a deal that delivers for the United Kingdom, actually protects the union – we are the Conservative and Unionist Party – and there cannot be and there must not be a hard border in Northern Ireland between the island of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

AM: When MPs look at this they’re going to have to take some really big decisions about how they vote. Will they know every dot and comma of our future trading relationship with the EU when they vote in the House of Commons?

BL: Well, obviously there’s a huge amount of coverage in what we’re looking at in that future trade agreement. We’ve outlined the details in the White Paper. Obviously we’ll be negotiating over
the next few weeks with the European Union. As I say, I think the Prime Minister will come back and Parliament will be voting on a withdrawal agreement deal and actually looking at political agreement about a future trade agreement. But I think parliamentarians will get behind, and people across our party will be able to support and see the referendum delivered in a way that’s good for our economy.

AM: So it won’t be vague and ‘waffley’?
BL: No, legislation never is vague and waffle, it’s always very, very precise.
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