JOHN SAWERS

ANDREW MARR SHOW
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Sir JOHN SAWERS

AM: Here’s the man himself, Sir John Sawers, former head of MI6. How did this come about? Because people think there’s Obama, there’s the OECD, lots and lots of big establishment groups weighing in on the Remain side, and surprise, surprise, here come the spooks as well.

JS: Well, Jonathan Evans and I met at a dinner back in February and we said to one another then this is actually a rather important debate and we’ve got something to say on this. We didn’t want to come in before the local elections, the real campaign on the European referendum is happening now, so we decided that we should intervene around this time.

AM: Now, what about Fraser Nelson’s point. He says actually of course there isn’t an EU intelligence service, everything is bilateral, you talk to the Germans, you talk to the French, you talk to others, but you don’t talk to the EU because there is nothing there to talk to.

JS: Well, when you conduct secret operations, yes, you do work bilaterally with each country. If we’re conducting a secret operation in Spain we work with our Spanish counterparts, who actually are very, very good, contrary to what Fraser was saying. But what the European Union does is it provides a legal framework for essential issues like data sharing. Now, data is vastly more important now in the analysis of who is associating with whom, who is communicating with whom, and you need to know that in order to uncover the networks of terrorists or cybercriminals that we have to deal with.
AM: But Michael Gove says the European Court of Justice, the ECJ, is limiting this in a very dangerous way and we need emergency legislation to get ourselves out from under the ECJ or our data sharing, our ability to survey will be severely compromised.

JS: Well, actually the European Union is promoting data sharing. The Passenger Name Records agreement that the Home Secretary secured recently will mean that we’ve got much better advanced information about people coming to the UK who might be of concern. We can check people before they actually leave their home countries. When Salah Abdelsalam, one of the Brussels bombers, was being searched for, the French were able to transfer DNA and fingerprints to Brussels very, very rapidly. Those sorts of requests for information used to take about four months. It now takes 15 minutes. So it’s actually wrong to say that there’s no added value from the European Union, there is added value. Now, the European Court of Justice did strike down an EU directive and member states are responding accordingly.

AM: This is about privacy and Michael Gove’s point, I think, is that the ECJ is overly-concerned about privacy and is going to increasingly hamper the operations of organisations like MI6.

JS: Well, I don’t actually accept that. I mean, it’s interesting actually, it’s one of Michael Gove’s colleagues, David Davis, who has taken a decision by the British parliament to the courts in order to reverse the decision of the British parliament. It’s rather bizarre that one of the anti-Europeans is using legal means in order to undermine –

AM: Anti-EU...

JS: - anti-EU people – who is using the courts to try to undermine a decision of the British parliament. But that’s where we are. Now, I think judges generally tend to err on the side of human rights rather than erring on the side of security. That’s beginning to
change as judges understand the scale of the security threat that Europe faces.

AM: What about our ability to deport dangerous people, people connected with terrorism, which have again been stopped by the EU?

JS: I don’t understand why you say they’re being stopped by the EU. Actually the EU has created the European Arrest Warrant. I remember back in the 1990s when the French had terrorists wanted in France who sought refuge in Britain, it took us ten long years to extradite them back to France. We now in the last few years, we’ve deported over 5,000 people to other European countries, and one of the people who were taking in part in the July 2005 bombings, the 21 July 2005 bombings, he fled to Italy. The Italians returned him within eight weeks, and that’s a remarkable change, because of EU legislation.

AM: And you think this kind of thing we would lose if we left the EU, we couldn’t renegotiate?

JS: Well, you might in time. Norway and Iceland are trying to negotiate an extradition agreement with the European Union. They’ve been trying for a good number of years and they haven’t succeeded. I think we need to bear in mind the importance of the structures that we have. We’ve built these structures over the last 30 or 40 years and we, Britain, have played a very important role, especially in making sure the security dimension is properly considered and properly integrated into the EU decisions that are taken. And if we walk away from it we will lose a lot of those gains.

AM: And you weren’t put to this by Number 10 or anybody else? This is your own decision.
JS: No, we did this – we agreed we would do this, we told our former services, we have an obligation to let them know when we break cover and we say something in public. And we let the government know at the end of last week that we were planning to do this.

AM: So if Michael Gove gets his way and we leave the EU and we then immediately come out of the ECJ ambit we will be less safe in your view?

JS: Well, I don’t – it’s not about the ECJ. The reason we will be less safe is because we will not be able to take part in the decisions that frame the sharing of data, which is a crucial part of counter-terrorism and counter-cyber work that we do these days. And we would lose the abilities of things like the European Arrest Warrant. And let me make a wider point as well here, Andrew. It’s not just about the day to day cooperation, it’s about the wider stability of our continent. We are only secure because the wider Europe is secure.

AM: And pulling out makes that less safe?

JS: And pulling out will make it more dangerous. There is a real risk of the pressures on the European Union, migration pressures, economic pressures, pressures from Russia, pulling the European Union apart. We’re seeing politics in Europe going to the extreme left, to the extreme right, and we need to make sure that the centre is solid and that the European Union plays its role for underpinning democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Europe.

AM: Well, pick up on all of those points later on the programme. Sir John, thank you very much indeed for joining us.
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