SIR KEIR STARMER

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 8TH JULY, 2018

SIR KEIR STARMER, MP
Shadow Brexit Secretary

KS: Andrew, let me start by being warm and generous. Can I just say well done England. What a fantastic result, fantastic team. I can’t believe we’re in the last four.
As for Chequers –

AM: Yes.

KS: I’m afraid it’s got fudge written all over it. If you look at the facilitated customs arrangement at the heart of this, it’s a rebadging of the partnership and it’s based on the idea that at the border you can distinguish between goods that are going to stay in the UK and those going to the EU. It’s unworkable. It’s a bureaucratic nightmare. So this is a fudge.

AM: But the overall plan is very similar to what you have told me in the past that you wanted. In other words there is going to be a common rulebook when it comes to goods and so forth, there is an attempt, as it were, to stay inside something very close to a common market when it comes to goods. There is going to be much easier migration from one side to the other, perhaps than people thought. The European Court is going to be pushed very much to one side. And there are specific promises when it comes to labour law, regulations, all the things that Labour were worried about were going to be undermined. They’re not going to be undermined.

KS: Well, Andrew, we’ve argued for a comprehensive customs union with the EU. In order to avoid that the Prime Minister has gone to these extraordinary lengths to come up with this
bureaucratic nightmare which is not going to work. So she doesn’t come anywhere near what we’re proposing.

AM: So to be absolutely clear you want to be inside the single market and the customs union?

KS: Well on the customs union we’ve said for a long time there should be a comprehensive customs union with the EU. Now on Monday week the Customs Bill is in parliament, so we’ve now got two propositions. We’ve got the Labour proposition which I think has the majority support in parliament and the Prime Minister’s new proposition. Let’s put it to a vote. I challenge the Prime Minister. Put it to a vote and see where the majority is in parliament on a customs union.

AM: So you think to be absolutely clear she should bring her Chequers compromise to the House of Commons, enshrine it in law and put it front of MPs?

KS: She’s got the opportunity Monday week. We’ve got amendments down saying have a customs union with the EU. That’s got cross party support, there are amendments down from Tory rebels on this. Put it to a vote so that we can actually see where the majority in parliament is on this.

AM: We’ve got something called a Labour Mobility Framework now from the government which is a system which sounds like there’s no visas for people who have got jobs to come from the EU and work here and vice versa, which again is quite similar to what you suggested about easy movement of people after the EU. Would you go further? Would you give EU citizens priority over people from other countries?

KS: Well Andrew, we’ll have to see what the detail is on the Prime Minister’s proposal, because she’s not being clear. There is a white
paper later in the week so we’ll see what that says. What we’ve said is there’s going to have to be an end to freedom of movement as we have it now, but we’re going to have to have movement that works for the economy and for our communities. And the economy needs people to be able to cross borders to work. To cross borders into the EU and from the EU into here. There’s no better example than the NHS. So I think any sensible proposal going forward is going to see an ability of people who are working either here or in the EU to be able to do that. We also need of course to recognise that we’re a country that has always believed that families should be able to live together and to reunite and we should welcome students. So you get the component parts of a sensible approach.

AM: My question is specifically whether citizens of the EU countries should have a priority status in any future immigration to this country.

KS: Well that obviously will have to be part of the negotiations.

AM: That’s something you can tell me here and now whether you think should happen or not.

KS: Well, it’s going to have to be part of the negotiation, but I think inevitably if you want a very good deal with the EU, which we do want and which we need, that comes with the idea that we’ll be as it were –

AM: So yes, they should have priority?

KS: - treatment for EU citizens in that way.

AM: They should have specially advantageous status as far as you’re concerned?
KS: Well, maybe have status because it’s part of the negotiation, but I accept the principle that if you want the right deal with the EU, and we do, that that is going to involve preferential treatment for EU citizens.

AM: Theresa May, I mean I don’t speak for Theresa May in any sense, but she has had a very difficult job clearly with her cabinet. She’s been jostling different cabinet members and she has come up with this new proposal. Now if the opposition said, ‘do you know what? It’s quite close to what we think, we will back you in these talks.’ She would be in a much, much stronger position with Brussels.

KS: But Andrew, she hasn’t met our demands. We’ve been clear, you need a comprehensive customs union and you need a single market deal with shared institutions, shared regulation. She’s come up with a fudge on customs. It is a fudge. It’s going to unravel. She’s going to have to re –

AM: Everything is a fudge?

KS: And on the free trade area that she’s got for goods and agricultural products well, fine. That’s a step in the right direction. But then it comes with the pretence that you can have free trade agreements with other countries in the world on goods and agricultural products where there’s going to be some variants. So there’s an unreality about the position she’s landed in.

AM: Nothing in this sublunary world is perfect and clearly she’s had to make lots of changes. The problem that you have, can I suggest, is the same as the problem that a lot of Brexit critics in the Tory Party also have, which is if you bring this down in the House of Commons and your suggestion about a vote would be a way of doing that, then you drive this country closer to the very
thing that you have said would be completely intolerable and impossible which is no deal.

KS: Well, no deal is intolerable. What we can’t say is that this fudge is therefore good enough. It’s not going to last. We’ve set out a clear position on the customs union. Let’s just vote on it, because if the majority thinks we should have a comprehensive customs union with the EU in parliament, which I believe it does, then at least that’s the basis for the negotiation.

AM: And this customs union would be the customs union. Not a customs union? It would be the customs union?

KS: Well Andrew, we’ve been round this track before. At the moment the customs arrangements are hardwired into the membership agreement, so you need something new. We can’t stay in those because they only give rise for members of the EU. But just let me be clear.

AM: Cut through the complexities.

KS: What we’re suggesting by a customs union is a customs union that does the work of the customs union. So it simply reflects the fact that it’s going to have to be in a new treaty, the EU/UK Treaty. Now I think everybody who’s looked at this recognises you’re going to have to have a new treaty, but there’s no magic in this, it’s simply the customs union replicated as a customs union between the EU 27 on the one side and the UK on the other.

AM: So as some commentators think, if the EU looks at this and says ‘do you know what? We can see the direction you’re going, we’re going to take you further. We want to blur the red lines further, we want to take you into the customs union and the single market and you must accept the four freedoms.’ By and large Labour would go along with that?
KS: Well, we’ll have to see what the response of the EU is. Businesses are already showing some unease with the current arrangement. We’ll see what the EU says. I do want the EU to be flexible and constructive about this. I do think there’s a feeling that too quickly the EU has rejected any basis for a slightly different negotiation. There’s going to have to be a negotiation. Whatever the final customs union arrangement is, whatever the final single market deal is, it’s going to have to be negotiated. It’s going to be have to be tailored to the UK. Obviously with the right balance of rights and obligations, but there has to be something that removes the hard red lines of the Prime Minister on the one side and sometimes the inflexibility of the EU on the other. That’s why I think it will be sensible for the Prime Minister to go with what the majority in parliament want and then to go forward with that authority.

AM: So for people seeing these things in very simplistic terms and saying the Prime Minister has gone soft, as it were, in terms of the kind of Brexit she wants, the Labour position is we want to be even softer?

KS: Well, I don’t think the soft hard works. She seems to have rejected some of the fancies of the, as it were, the hard or more extreme Brexiteers. That is a good thing. But in order to save face and say but I still am outside a customs union and a single market deal, she’s gone for a fudge and that has got to be cleared up.

AM: But a lot of people already think that this is betraying the Brexit vote.

KS: Well I don’t think that’s right. The referendum asked one question. Do you want to be in the EU or out of the EU. It didn’t answer the question if you’re to have a future relationship with the
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EU what is that going to look like. And that’s the debate that we’re in the middle of at the moment.

AM: The Unite union has said that it is open now to a second referendum, a people’s vote and all the rest of it. Momentum is campaigning, or some people in Momentum are campaigning now on the same thing. Under what circumstances would you think that a second plebiscite or people’s vote would be accepted?

KS: Well Andrew, the position of the Labour Party has been that we’re not calling for a second referendum. We focus very much on the voting -

AM: But it’s very odd. You’re not calling for it, you’re letting everybody else call for it. You’re standing there quietly.

KS: We’ve been focusing on a meaningful vote in parliament. But what we’ve also said is this. That should the Article 50 deal that the Prime Minister brings back be voted down or worse there’s no deal, then that’s a very serious situation and we’re going to have to confront it when we get there and that parliament must decide what happens next. And in those circumstances it seems to me the sensible thing is to keep all our options on the table.

AM: Because you’ve said at a private meeting with business that if parliament decides-- the party decides ‘this might involve a General Election or a people’s vote.’

KS: Well, in the event that Article 50 is voted down, or there’s no deal, that’s a serious situation. Parliament should decide what happens next and at that stage there could be a General Election, there could be other options, but all options it seems to me ought to be on the table because that’s a situation we have to avoid at all costs.
AM: All right. There’s been a row this week, as you know, about anti-Semitism again. The international full definition for the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance is one that’s accepted by almost everybody. By the courts, the Scottish parliament, the Welsh Assembly, most Labour councils, all across the board this is accepted. Except by the Labour Party, which thinks it can do a better definition of anti-Semitism than the International Holocaust Association.

KS: Well I believe in the full definition. I think you’re absolutely right. Councils, institutions across the country have accepted the full definition. I think that’s the right position to be in and I think –

AM: So why do you think Labour hasn’t adopted it?

KS: Well there’s some argument as to whether Labour has or hasn’t, but I would urge everybody within the Labour Party to listen to the voices that have come out in recent days and get to a position where we are supporting the full definition. I think it’s really important, including the examples. We have to be very clear about our position on this.

AM: And that’s something that Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell and the leadership of the Labour Party have to look at and if necessary change their minds on?

KS: Well I think we need to reflect on what’s been said in the last few days and if we are not in a position of supporting the full definition we need to get into that position and sharpish.

AM: Admirably clear. Sir Keir Starmer, thank you very much indeed for that.

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