

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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JOHN McDONNELL, MP

Shadow Chancellor

AM: John McDonnell, Shadow Chancellor is with me. The truth of the matter is you don't want an election now because you think you'd lose it.

JN: No. No, I want an election. I want it as soon as we possibly can but sometimes you do have to put the country before party and the key thing for me now – and I think it isn't just me, it's across the opposition parties and within the Conservative Party itself is we've got to prevent Boris Johnson forcing through a no deal because of the damage it could do for our country.

AM: So let's be very explicit. You think that despite the Act of Parliaments will come into force next week, Boris Johnson would simply run the clock out and leave without a deal while pretending that it's all about an election?

JM: Potentially, and it looks like – from what Amber Rudd has just said, the lack preparation for a deal and the concentration on a no deal looks as though that's his strategy. I echo what you've said earlier on this programme, is that I think we're in an extremely serious constitutional position and now's the time to put party advantage to one side and concentrate on the seriousness of the situation we're in.

AM: If you don't believe Boris Johnson you can sort that out by legislating for the date of an election. The House of Commons can deal with this tomorrow.

JM: We don't believe that we can pin him down and I don't trust him an inch and I don't think anyone does. I think that we've got a Prime Minister now who's saying he won't even abide by the law. By the law. I've never heard that before. Now we're in a situation now where no one can trust while he's in place what can

happen. So what we've got to do now is use every mechanism we possibly can to rule out a no deal, and that's that we're trying to legislate on as best we can, but also once we've got to that situation we can then, I think, that's the time we can have a General Election.

AM: One more time with feeling. The easiest way to get a no deal and to ensure that there's an extension – sorry to get a deal and to ensure there's an extension – is to have Jeremy Corbyn, from your point of view as prime minister going and doing it himself. That is the obvious way to do it from your point of view. That's what locks everything in. Have an election and let that happen.

JM: The situation we're in at the moment is that we're finding it really difficult – and I admit this in parliament – to secure a mechanism that will enable us to have that election, because if we go through – for example if on Monday we vote for the motion that Boris Johnson has put forward, that retains in his hands the timing of that election. And we don't trust him.

AM: Can't you amend that to put the date in?

JM: We can't amend that legislation and we've tried that. We've taken legal advice and we've said we can put an amendment up but that can be disregarded by the Prime Minister, so we're then in a situation where we have to then trust him not to push us over the edge of a no deal. Look, if his own brother can't trust him, how can we trust him?

AM: So your strategy depends entirely on the EU granting this extension. Can I ask if the EU has given you any kind of indications that they will do so?

JM: All the indications we've had in the past is about the ability to have an extension based upon a significant move in this country. I think the significance of the legislation we're putting through at the moment, the Benn Bill, would enable that to happen.

AM: So you don't have guarantees right now.

JM: We're confident now, yeah.

AM; The reason I'm asking it, it's one of the things Boris Johnson could do.

JM: I understand.

AM: Is pick up the phone and phone for instance Viktor Orbán in Hungary and say, 'd'you know what, make sure that we don't get that extension, get me out of a hole.' That's perfectly possibly and that could completely scupper your plan, take us to no deal.

JM: I completely understand that. I believe, on the assurances that we've been given in the past that the European Union – I think and they've held together as one up until now in all these negotiations – I believe they would allow that extension. The issue for us is that what Boris Johnson is doing it deeply reckless for the whole of our country and we've got to do everything we can to prevent that happening.

AM: Well let me come onto your policy. Is it still your policy to negotiate a so-called 'jobs first' or a pro-Labour Brexit deal?

JM: I think we've got to get to the situation now where we accept that that offer is from the European Union.

AM: So you would negotiate a deal yourself?

JM: I think it's a matter of just confirming what the offer would be and then we've said then it has to go back to the people again.

AM: So by the offer, you mean Theresa May's deal, presumably?

JM: Well there were issues –

M: There's no other offer.

JM: No well I was in negotiations for six week with the Conservatives and there were a whole range of issues there that were addressed which from the indications that we were getting from the European Union there might be able to have some shift on. So you can an offer consolidating that would then go back to the people. We believe the people should have the final decision.

AM: So you have this new offer which is presumably based around membership of the Customs Union and the single market?

JM: There was a range of positions that the Europe Union was sympathetic to. We'd have to consolidate that and then put it to the British people as one of the options.

AM: So something looking a bit like May's deal is negotiated by the Labour Party. You then come back, you put it to the people. In that referendum how do you vote?

JM: I would campaign for remain.

AM: So it would be this deal or remain?

JM: I think it's a matter of saying, look, this is what the offer is, that's the reality of what the European Union are willing to agree. The alternative to that is to remain and people across party – and I don't think this a party political thing, I think it's a thing across parties that people have to judge what is in the best interests of the country. For me I believe remain is in the bests interest of the country but others will take a different view, even within my own party.

AM: So this is a slight strange position, if I may say so. You go over, you negotiate and you come back and you don't put the results of your negotiation to the British people as the favoured option, you put remain is the favoured option. In which case, if you're the EU, why negotiate?

JM: Well you have to be honest with people and say look, this is the offer that's available to us and this is the offer that Parliament is willing to agree to, but there will be in any individual party, differences of view. And this has what happened in past referenda.

AM: If you're the EU and you know that John McDonnell and the Labour Party want to remain and are going to ask the British people to remain, why would you give them any kind of deal at all? There is no pressure on them to give us anything.

JM: No, the EU will know that to get anything through at the moment in terms of popular support within the country they would have to present an offer that is actually acceptable across all parties, not just one individual party and that's the situation we're in.

AM: So this proposed Labour referendum after the next election completely cuts out the views of all of those people who want to leave without a deal? Where the hard Brexiteers get no chance at all. There's nothing on the ballot paper for them, they're pushed to one side?

JM: We have to be honest with people. I can't support a no deal and I think it would be so damaging for the country, I don't believe it's a realistic offer.

AM: And you're not going to give people the chance to disagree with you?

JM: I think that's - I'd like to give them a chance in a General Election as soon as we possibly can and then we'd have a referendum. But I have to exercise the judgement that actually is exercised by so many people now that no deal would be an absolute disaster.

AM: So let's talk about the Labour Party's official policy because I've had lots of Labour figures sitting in that chair saying that they are in favour of remain. In the end they think remaining in the EU is the best deal available to Britain. And yet time and time again when it comes to the manifesto the Labour Party Manifesto is, as it were, a pro-Brexit manifesto. I've got a graphic here of the last two manifestos. 2017. 'We will ... seek to unite the country around a Brexit deal.'

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'We believe such a deal, a Brexit deal, could bring our country back together.'

In other words, when it comes to the actual motion of the party at high levels to work out what's in the manifesto you stick with a Brexit deal.

JM: Also in that manifesto we said very, very clearly we would not support a no deal Brexit. And that's what we've done.

AM: I understand that, yes.

JM: So our position – let me just finish what I'm going to say because this is quite important so people will understand. All our efforts at the moment is to prevent a no deal Brexit 'cause it would be so damaging to the living standards of our people, their jobs and the economy overall. That's our focus at the moment. We're saying, of course we are, that actually there would be an offer in terms of a Brexit proposal, a deal of some sort that will come, but many of us – many of us believe remain is the best deal. So the people should decide. Let the people decide. But in every political party there will be a difference of view and it's better to be honest about that.

AM: This sounds very much to me like we're back into 1975 and Harold Wilson territory.

JM: Interesting.

AM: Is this a moment when it's up to individual Labour MPs to say what they think or will there be a single Labour Party policy on the big issue of standing inside the EU or not staying inside the EU?

JM: Our party conference is coming up in a few weeks and we'll determine our final policy as it evolves. But you're right, when Harold Wilson was the Prime Minister he enabled, just as we did in the last referendum, he enabled people within the party to take different views. And I think actually that's most probably a more honest approach than there is at the moment in terms of other political parties. In every political party there will be a difference of view because this issue is so important to the future of the country people have got to exercise their best judgement. And I think that's most probably the wisest approach.

AM: And at that Labour conference, will you, John McDonnell, be arguing for Labour to be a fully-fledged, outspoken remain party?

JM: No. I'll be expressing my personal view on what is best, but I'll also be respecting other people's views as well and recognise, as a political party we'll have a range of views, just as every other political party has.

AM: If tomorrow the government propose a referendum, would you vote for it?

JM: Yes, I most probably would. I would like a General Election first, I've always said that.

AM; But not yet, not yet.

JM: Well I don't see – Not yet, until we've ruled a no deal off the agenda I can't risk with Boris Johnson being in power that he wouldn't somehow impose that on the country. So we can get no deal off the agenda, then I'd like a General Election. And part of that would be saying let's have a referendum.

AM: Thinking of the options ahead of him another option is to say you are insisting that I go and take this surrender document to Brussels. I absolutely refuse to do it. I can't break the law and therefore I resign as Prime Minister. In those circumstances the Queen has an obligation to go for the next person who might be able to form a majority. But parliament isn't sitting at this point so we can't actually test parliamentary opinion, but Jeremy Corbyn has some kind of right to be expect to be called by the Queen. The problem with that, we both know, is that Jo Swinson and others say they would not serve in a government of national unity under Jeremy Corbyn. He's your friend and comrade but he's a highly divisive figure in the House of Commons and the country. Could you possibly go along the corridor and say, 'listen comrade, in the interest of the country, in the interests of the party at this extraordinary time would you step aside for a few weeks to allow another figure, a transitional caretaker Prime Minister?

JM: No. What we'd do is exactly as he's doing now. He's bringing together all the opposition parties and he's got them working together, working together incredibly effectively. And we'd be able to say to them we would have a caretaker government under Jeremy Corbyn, it will be time limited –

AM: And it has to be Jeremy Corbyn?

JM: Well, it has to be because he's the Leader of the Opposition and in that way – just he's united them effectively over these last few weeks I think he could do that as a caretaker prime minister.

AM: So you wouldn't compromise? You wouldn't allow somebody else, a Ken Clarke figure or whoever it might be to come in and as it were unite all the remain voices in parliament?

JM: I think we can unite them under Jeremy Corbyn.

AM: Do you?

JM: Yes I do. We have done.

AM: Jo Swinson says absolutely not.

JM: I know but Jo's been working with us, she's been at those meetings and d'you know everyone who's come out of those meetings have said how constructive and productive they've been and we've succeeded in not just agreeing amongst ourselves, but delivering the vote in parliament as well.

AM: You've been talking, as you say, to all these parties. You've been talking to the SNP. Have you offered the SNP formally, what you said at the Edinburgh Festival that the Labour Party would not stand in the way of another Scottish –

JM: No, no. No.

AM: Well you said it at the Edinburgh Festival.

JM: I know, there's no deals, there's no deals but that was my view as I expressed. There's no deals at all whatsoever.

AM: You said we wouldn't block something like that, at the Edinburgh Festival, that's democracy. We'd let the Scottish people decide.

JM: That's right, but that's not a deal. That's my personal view. That's the view I've expressed.

AM: But you're the number 2 in the Labour Party.

JM: Yes, exactly, but that's not doing a deal. That's saying that's my position. But we're not doing any deals with anyone. And we go into the next election I believe we'll have a majority. But if we're in a minority we'll be a minority government. We won't do coalitions. We'll expect them to support the party...

AM: And you know exactly what they want which is an independence referendum in Scotland as soon as possible. I put to you, a Labour government would allow that to happen and therefore people voting Labour at the next election must think this might be the end of the UK.

JM: No, not at all. We've said no deals whatsoever. If we're in a minority position we'll form a government and the other opposition parties can vote for the policies we're advocating, and if they don't well we'll go back to the people.

AM: But as a minority government you certainly wouldn't stop Scotland having a referendum?

JM: I've said then I don't think it's up to the UK parliament to block a referendum but there has to be – we've said a couple of things. Look, I don't think there should be another referendum. I think Scotland should stay united within the United Kingdom. It would not be a priority for us, maybe for some forthcoming. We've got enough to deal with the climate change and austerity et cetera. Certainly wouldn't be in the early years of a Labour government and there's have to be a proper mandate in Scotland. The Scottish people themselves would have to decide.

AM: Let's look at some domestic policies. It's been reported that you want to identify everybody in the country earning over £150,000. Is that true and if so why do you want to identify them?

JM: No. A report came to us about corporate governance and that was one of the proposals. It's not one that I favour but what we did say if you remember that for those people earning over a million pounds would expect their income tax returns to be public, just like mine are.

AM: Over a million?

JM: Yes.

AM: You've also said, I think two and a half million people who instead of putting money into pensions have invested in a property, buy to let and those properties, under a Labour government would be sold to the tenants. And the question is at what price?

JM: Right. We're exploring the idea of a Right to Buy for private tenants which is they're available to council tenants and others and then the discussion would be about what would be a fair price. And if you remember in the past there's been fair rent assessments in this country so some people have put forward the ideal you could have a fair price assessment, but that's part of the consultations that we'll be having.

AM: So the question is would it be the price that the person who'd originally bought the property at?

JM: Oh I wouldn't expect anyone to lose out, of course not.

AM: So it would a fair market price?

JM: Of course it would. People would be protected of course. You wouldn't want to – people who've invested in that way you'd want them protected. But this is giving people who've rented over a period of years the opportunity to purchase if they could, 'cause it gives their family stability.

AM: That makes it very clear. John McDonnell, thanks very much for talking to us.

Ends