ANDREW MARR SHOW, 9TH OCT. 2016

SIR KEIR STARMER

AM: Can I ask first of all, on the simple basic question of does the Labour Party accept that Brexit is going to happen and you’re not going to try and frustrate it in the Commons or anywhere else or call for a second referendum or have a General Election and try and reverse it. Have you accepted that Brexit is now a fact and will happen?

KS: The referendum is clear and has to be accepted and we can’t have a rerun of the question that was put to the country earlier this year. But, and it’s a big but, there has to be democratic grip of the process and at the moment what the Prime Minister is trying to do is to manoeuvre without any scrutiny in parliament. And that’s why the terms of which we’re going to negotiate absolutely have to be put to a vote in the House. Because if we can’t get the opening terms right we’ll never get the right result.

AM: I want to come onto that very directly but before we do can I ask again about the general principle. Do you also accept that the reasons that millions and millions of people voted to leave the EU, millions of the Labour Party voters from the midlands and the north in particular, was that they wanted to see an end to uncontrolled migration and that therefore taking back control of migration is something that now has to happen?

KS: Look, we have to accept that there’s great concern out there about immigration and about freedom of movement. That’s been in every poll that’s been conducted in the last ten years, it’s evidenced in the Brexit result and I went around the country myself -

AM: You went round the country –
KS: - for the first four of five months of this year to 30 or 40 different towns and cities and it’s palpable and it’s clear. So it’s a real concern, it has to be listened to and it has to be addressed.

AM: What were people telling you about it?

KS: But, and there are some real buts, we have to understand what that concern is and address it in a way which is meaningful. What we shouldn’t do is fan the flames of division and I – and I’m sure and many people watching this were appalled by the sort of language with lists of foreign workers with – about foreign - It was absolutely clear. We can’t fan the division. Let’s take the concerns seriously, address them seriously. But not fan division. That is the wrong tone for these negotiations.

AM: Let me move away from tone just ask you directly about Amber Rudd’s proposals, because in fact - and these lists of how many foreign workers and British workers are employed by each company won’t be published and we already do this for non EU workers. Let me put it to you that if Brexit is going to mean something serious, a big change in our politics, then it means a change in the number of British people who are trained and brought into jobs. It really must actually feel like something has changed. And if you’re going to do that you do have to know whether one coffee shop is employing 80% of EU workers and another coffee chain is employing 30%.

KS: Well, the language and tone has been quite extraordinary. This has to be a delicate negotiation and freedom of movement has to be very carefully thought through, that’s clear. But to use the language and the tone that has been used I think is fundamentally wrong and it shouldn’t be done in that way.

AM: But the proposals themselves are not necessarily fundamentally xenophobic or silly.
KS: No, and these issues have to be, as I say, very carefully considered.

AM: Right, so it’s language being the problem. As I say, can I – one final question on immigration because this is going to be very, very important to the future debate about Brexit and so forth. By and large do you think that immigration is too high, too low or just about right?

KS: There’s been a huge amount of immigration over the large ten years and people are understandably concerned about it. I think it should be reduced and it should be reduced by making sure that we’ve got the skills in this country that are needed for the jobs that need to be done. As I went round the country one thing was absolutely clear, there’s a skills shortage. This is a – this is a failure of government, it’s got nothing to do with immigrants who get blamed. It’s a skills failure and gap across the country and that’s got to be dealt with. But just be – I know immigration is a central issue but we’ve got to be –

AM: I’m going to come onto the next bit I promise.

KS: And the single market and –

AM: Well I’m glad you mentioned those words because if you accept that we have to retain, we have to take back control of immigration that means an end to free movement which means that we cannot join a tariff-free single market.

KS: We have to be open to adjustments of the freedom of movement rules and how they apply in this country, but we have to be shrewd and careful about how we do it, because while –

AM: So some free movement you’d allow?

KS: I accept that freedom of movement was a major issue in the referendum but nobody where they voted to leave or to remain
voted for the government to take an axe to the economy. And the Prime Minister’s stance on the single market is making it nigh on impossible for us to be in the – or have access to the single market. That is a huge risk to the economy, to jobs and to working people. And I’ll just say this –

AM: I’m sorry, but there’s a series of logical problems there which is if you think that Brexit was partly about taking back control over immigration, you say yes, we must, once we take back control of immigration –

KS: I say it’s got to be part of the negotiations.

AM: But not total control?

KS: And we must remember that’s free movement of workers was the principle, so part of the negotiation. But it is important to appreciate this. Apart from defence of the realm, I can’t think of a Prime Minister in recent history who has not put the economy first. It is astonishing that the Prime Minister is not putting the economy first and that’s what’s causing such great concern about her approach. The economy and jobs and workers’ rights, they have to be a priority. And how you negotiate about freedom of movement is part of that, but not to put the economy first is astonishing.

AM: And so we come on to what may happen in the House of Commons where Theresa May does not have a very large majority and may not have a majority at all over some of those issues. What you are you saying today is that you want – I think Ed Miliband has put down a Question – you want Theresa May and the government to come forward and to explain their negotiating position clearly before the Brexit talks start, before Article 50 is triggered.

KS: Absolutely!

AM: And there should be a Commons vote on that?
KS: Absolutely. Come forward, put the terms before the House and have a vote on it, because if you don’t even have the confidence of the House on the starting terms, then you are heading for disaster.

AM: She says, as you know, that we can’t negotiate if we’re doing it all in public. We can’t go to the House of Commons and say this is what we’re trying to get, this is what we really think, and then go and negotiate it, therefore it’s – it maybe feel a bit undemocratic or a bit closed but that’s how a negotiation has to happen.

KS: But Andrew, what she’s really saying is leave it to us, let’s not have any scrutiny or accountability. See you sometime in 2019 with a deal which we won’t vote on even then. That is totally unacceptable. Nobody gave the government a blank cheque here. We must have a vote on the opening terms of the negotiation.

AM: And do you believe, looking across the House of Commons, that you would in those circumstances have a majority to frustrate the Prime Minister if she tried to do it secretly?

KS: I don’t think it’s a question of frustrating. It’s a question of account –

AM: Or defeating her? Or defeating her?
KS: It’s a question of accountability. If she can’t even get the confidence of the House on the opening terms then they’re probably the wrong opening terms.

AM: What she has said very clearly this week is there going to be what she calls ‘The Great Repeal Bill,’ to take us out of the European Communities Act of 1972 and take all of the measures that have been passed back into British law so they can then be looked at again. Will the Labour Party support that?
KS: Well, I think it’s a sensible thing to make sure that the rights that are there for working people now are enshrined in our law and one of the things I called for very early with Frances O’Grady of the TUC was that workplace rights should be enshrined in our law now. So I’m not against that. I think it should be done sooner rather than later. There are issues now to be resolved. EU citizens in this country want to know what their future holds and they feel that they’re just a bargaining chip at the moment.

Regional funding is something which the Labour Party is very –

AM: So lots of issues there, but would you use those issues to vote down the so called Great Repeal Bill?

KS: Well, we’ll have to see what the detail is.

AM: You might?

KS: Well it’s very difficult to say when there’s absolutely no detail. I’m not against the principle that rights that are now there because of the EU should be vested in our law. I think that’s the sensible place to be.

AM: In terms of immigration reduction you said you think the numbers should go down. Any sense of how much they should go down?

KS: Look, I think one of the big mistakes of the government since 2010 is to reduce immigration to a single figure. The net migration target and not to see it in any other way. That causes all sorts of perverse outcomes. The impact on international students if one of them.

AM: Okay, well let’s keep away from numbers and would you like to see it come down substantially?

KS: I would like – one of the things that I was struck by when I went round the country was that company after company were
saying to me, they have to recruit from Europe because they can’t get the skills here.

AM: They’re not training people.

KS: Well that’s not an immigration issue, that’s a skills issue and we need to address that. And if that brings numbers down, as it should – I don’t want to stop companies recruiting from abroad, but I don’t want them to require them to do so, so we are driving the numbers because we’ve got skills shortage that we’ve not addressed and that’s a failure of government.

AM: Now you left the Shadow Cabinet, you said that you did not think that Jeremy Corbyn was a plausible future Prime Minister. You’re now back in again. Have you changed your mind about Jeremy Corbyn? Would he make a good Prime Minister?

KS: Well look, we had a leadership election, Jeremy won that, we accept it and we respect it. We’ve had three months of internal division, everybody on either side in the leadership debate in the Labour Party has hated that division over the last three months. We now need to pull together and work to have the most effective opposition that we can. Of course we want a Labour government, of course we want to support Jeremy to that end. He’s won the membership, he now needs to win the country, he knows that, we know that, and we need to work together on that.

AM: It’s just as a question, if I may so who I am talking to here. Am I talking to Jeremy Corbyn’s voice on Brexit, because he said he doesn’t want to reduce immigration, or am I talking to an autonomous voice, and on that subject, what about the Shadow Shadow Cabinet? This idea that some of your colleagues in the Parliamentary Labour Party are caucusing and developing policies away from the Shadow Cabinet. That is surely a very dangerous thing for an opposition party to be doing.
KS: Well there are unresolved issues in the Parliamentary Labour Party and we do need to resolve them as soon as possible. We need to be an outward looking confident party rather than inward divided party, so we need to address that. On the other hand I respect colleagues who want to make their voice heard from different places, whether it’s the back bench, the mid bench through select committees or on the front bench. But we all so need to remember that forming a strong opposition is what is needed, not just for the Labour Party but for the country.

AM: Rosie Winton who was a loyal hardworking Chief Whip who’s been removed. Are you sad to see her go?

KS: I’m sad to see her go. I thought she was highly respected. I only knew her obviously for a short time, but I respected her too.

AM: And what would you say to other Labour Whips who are now saying, well if she’s gone, I’m going too?

KS: Well I’ve seen some speculation about that. I’ve not actually had conversations with any of them. I think again stepping back, we do need to pull together and to remember the country needs an effective opposition and we’ve got to provide it.

ENDS