

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 9TH DECEMBER, 2018 – BORIS JOHNSON, MP

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Former Foreign Secretary

AM: To his critics he's the man who's blithe airy promises have landed us in a Brexit nightmare and a thoroughly embarrassing Foreign Secretary. To his admirers he's one of the very few truly rousing Tory politicians of the age and a shoe in surely as the party's next leader. He is of course Boris Johnson.

BJ: Good morning, Andrew.

AM: You are the man who got us into this mess, aren't you?

BJ: Well, I certainly think that what we need now is a way out of what is unquestionably a difficult political position for the government and for the country and I think one of the myths is that there is no alternative to the backstop. And Rebecca Long-Bailey was quite right just now to lay into the backstop and I heard what you said to Steve Barclay.

AM: I'll come on to the backstop in a moment.

BJ: But it is not right for our country. It's a kind of lobsterpot, a legal lobsterpot in which we get trapped to the EU runs our trade policy, they set laws for us, a huge chunk of our law comes from Brussels, and we need to get out of it. It's colony status for the UK.

AM: Let's look at where we are now if we could, which is in a pretty despairing place in politics, parliament all over the place, lots of economic predictions ahead which look pretty grim. During that sunlit 2016 referendum you said it was going to be fantastic. You said we were going to be in a really good place economically with a fantastic future. It does not feel like that now. Prosper, flourish and thrive was the words you used.

BJ: I do think that we can have a fantastic future if we do Brexit right. I passionately and sincerely believe that. But it requires us

genuinely to be able to take back control of our trade policy and genuinely be able to champion our innovators in the way we handle our legislation and if necessary to do things differently from our friends and partners in the European Union. That is what Brexit offered and that is exactly what at the moment is being frustrated by this backstop arrangement. And that is why it's so important to get rid of it, as I think Rebecca was right to say.

AM: You were actually in Cabinet when Cabinet voted for the Northern Ireland backstop or chose the... You were in Cabinet when you agreed the divorce bill and you were in Cabinet for the draft Withdrawal Agreement and then you left after David Davis had left and you're criticising it from the outside. An awful lot of people watching think this not about Brexit, this is about Boris Johnson's personal ambition.

BJ: Absolute nonsense. And let's look first of all at what Cabinet agreed on December 8th last year insofar as the joint report was concerned. And at that stage that was sold to us as something completely, purely provisional. A form of words –

AM: It still is provisional.

BJ: - that was necessary to get the government through a very difficult summit. We were told that it would have no binding force. We're now proposing that the UK for the foreseeable future would take laws from the EU with no say in those laws.

AM: Only if the transition arrangements isn't extended -

BJ: - we would not be able, we would not be able to set our own tariffs or do free trade deals. And the real problem with the backstop arrangement, it gives the power to Brussels and to all the other EU member states effectively to blackmail us and to get what they want out of the future trade negotiation. So it is a diabolical, it is a diabolical negotiating position to be in.

AM: I was going to say blackmail is a very emotive word.

BJ: Ransom if you like.

AM: So is diabolical. The problem is as the government says there's a whole series of things would happen before the backstop would be tripped, if it ever was. In other words as long as we get the transitional agreement, we get the trade agreement with the EU in time you don't need to go anywhere near the backstop. And also for the EU the backstop is uncomfortable. We could get access to their markets without paying in.

BJ: Well I heard this, but first of all it gives the EU the power to delay the negotiations until such time as we are obliged to go into the backstop.

AM: If that's what they want to do.

BJ: Okay, well let's take your, if you're correct in thinking that the EU doesn't like the backstop and the government doesn't like the backstop and the public doesn't like the backstop and indeed most MPs –

AM: It's an insurance policy.

BJ: - listening to the debate in the House of Commons it was very interesting, because – and I listened to a huge amount of it. MPs on all sides were united in their opposition to this arrangement, this Constitutional arrangement. And so the way forward – there is a programme that would unite the House and it's very, very simple. You go forward with this deal but you take out the backstop. That's what needs to happen.

AM: Bin the backstop with alliterates nicely but it is something that the EU says unequivocally again and again and again is impossible. They won't do a Withdrawal Agreement without some kind of insurance policy, the backstop. I've got quote after quote after quote. Michel Barnier: 'Without a backstop there can be no Withdrawal Agreement. This an EU issue, not only an Irish issue.' Theresa May herself says: 'There is no possible agreement without a backstop.' And that's just true.

BJ: No it's not actually and I think that the issue of how to solve the Irish border question was never properly taken so early on in

the talks and what we should do now is remit it to the discussion on the free trade agreement which can take place during the implementation period, right up to the end of 2020. And as for whether or not it's possible for our EU friends and partners to accept the idea of a withdrawal agreement that doesn't include the backstop, listen to –

AM: They've had two years and they said no.

BJ: - but it took them ages even to think of it. The idea was partly generated by us. Look at what Romano Prodi, the former EU Commission President had to say yesterday. He said that if the House of Commons votes down this deal, which I earnestly hope that we do, then the EU will of course negotiate. And to be frank, it's not their number one issue at the moment and I think he's a very important voice, Romano Prodi, and a very influential figure. And I think that they will look at the ups and downs. They will say what is the risk here? The risk of no deal. Nobody on either side of the Channel wants no deal. They will say is it possible for us to reword –

AM: This is very much crossed fingers.

BJ: No, not at all. Is it possible for us to reword this Northern Ireland Protocol, the 174 pages, so as it give the UK a unilateral exit mechanism? Yes, it is. And indeed the UK drafted such proposals but then failed to table them. That is the way to go.

AM: You mentioned the Northern Irish border. You're proposed idea is the so called Canada plus plus model, yes?

BJ: Yes.

AM: The free trade model on the Canadian model.

BJ: Yes.

AM: Now the Prime Minister has conceded that that was offered to us by the EU, but only to Great Britain. Not to Northern Ireland. So that would indeed create a border in the Irish Sea. You went to the DUP conference, you can't want that. That can't be acceptable to you?

BJ: No, of course not.

AM: So it's not an acceptable model?

BJ: Of course what the EU is trying to do is to give us an absolutely unacceptable choice. They're trying to say you can either divide your country or the whole country can remain in subjection forever accepting EU law and bound by EU trade rules. So that's the choice that they're trying to offer. We've got to reject that choice by getting rid of the backstop and remitting as I say the solution to that Irish border problem to the discussions on the free trade deal.

AM: Basically what you're saying on this and the other one is don't believe what the EU are saying, they're just bluffing. If we push them up against the wall they will crumble. I just put it to you, with only weeks and months to go before no deal happens this is a very, very dangerous game of dice that you're suggesting.

BJ: And obviously the way to be clear with them is we've got to do several things. First of all we have to prepare for no deal and I think Steve Barclay was exactly right in a lot of things he said just now. We have to prepare convincingly for no deal. We've got to get our ports ready, we've got to get our aviation data all that, we can get all that ready, but we need to be clear with them that unless –

AM: We're very short of time now.

BJ: - unless they help us then there is a risk of no deal and to incentivise them further we should say that we will delay the payment of at least half the 39 billion until they've done a free trade deal by the end of 2020. And that is the way to I think put a bit of a tiger in the tank and to get these talks moving.

AM: Well. We are an honourable, law based society. This is money that we have promised and money that we owe.

BJ: Well that's contested, isn't it?

AM: We have promised this money and we owe this money. To say right at the last minute we're not going to give you the money is kind of political gangsterism isn't it?

BJ: No, not at all, not at all. The House of Lords Select Committee made it very clear that the payment of this money is legally pretty arbitrary. It's all political and down to the negotiations and you wouldn't expect us – and I've never known an EU negotiation in which the financial settlement is made before the conclusion.

AM: But we have solemnly promised it. As a government Britain has promised this money.

BJ: I may say I think it's been a great mistake to take the payment of –

AM: You were in Cabinet when it was promised.

BJ: - the payment of the so called debt is out of order.

AM: You say it's a mistake now but you were in the Cabinet and the Cabinet, the government promised this money.

BJ: You will have observed that I resigned from the Cabinet in protest of the way that the negot –

AM; After all of this.

BJ: No. In protest of the deal that I eventually reluctantly came to the conclusion we were about to do. And actually since I left I'm afraid my predictions have been more than vindicated. It's got worse. I never expected that we would end up in a situation where we would be seriously saying that we were going to be willing to remain locked in this backstop arrangement without any unilateral escape mechanism.

I just want to come back to this point because I think this is the way out for our country and for the Prime Minister.

What she needs to do I think she needs to recognise that there is overwhelming hostility to this backstop arrangement on all sides of the House and that that is the thing that needs to be changed, but there is support for much else that she has negotiated and the stuff on citizens, the looking after the 3.2 million here in this country, looking after UK citizens abroad, all that is very sensible.

AM: Let me put to you gently – that to suggest the Prime Minister at this stage, having completed the negotiations, everyone says

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these negotiations are over, could go back to Brussels between now and Christmas and get the backstop removed is fantasy politics. It's never going to happen, it's unicorns.

BJ: No. Let me suggest to you gently, Andrew, that every single EU negotiation and we both have covered a few, concludes in exactly this way. And the horses change places in the final furlong.

AM: This one's over.

BJ: This is where the deals are done. Nothing is over until it's over. And it will be – let me put it this way. If the Prime Minister is able to go back to Brussels next week, this week, and say I'm afraid that the Irish backstop solution that you have come up with is very unpopular, not just with the country but also with the House of Commons. And if the House of Commons gives her, as I think it will, a powerful mandate to change that backstop –

AM: Well defeat by a hundred votes a funny kind of powerful mandate.

BJ: A powerful mandate to change that backstop then I think as Romano Prodi the former EU Commission President has said, they will listen. Because what they want is the best possible deal with the UK. A deal that keeps their goods and services flowing on either side of the Channel and neither side wants to go out with a no deal Brexit.

AM: Why should people take your word for this?

BJ: Because I think - they don't have to take my word. I'm simply giving you my best –

AM; The alternative is prognostication.

BJ: - the best opinion I can possibly give about the way forward. And I think it's very, very sad –

AM: The alternative prognostication is that she loses the vote, the government is in effect collapsing and Britain has the choice between a very soft Brexit, a Norway style Brexit or possibly a referendum and no Brexit at all, and that is where you are leading.

BJ: No, I don't think either of those things are remotely likely and I think both of them would be a betrayal of the referendum result. As Steve Barclay was saying just now, I think that both the Norway solution and a second referendum have grave, grave defects. The Norway solution as Steve was saying just now would mean that we were subject to EU regulation over an even broader swathe of things than we are under the current - under the deals proposed by the Prime Minister. And as for a second referendum –

AM: You're against it?

BJ: I think – well I think the people of this country would think it was absolutely extraordinary to you know, ask them to vote again when the politicians haven't even implemented the verdict to the first referendum.

AM: Have you ever contemplated a second referendum as a way out of this?

BJ: No, I don't want a second referendum. I don't think it should be the way it is. Interesting, if you look at this issue of the backstop, the people and parliament are actually together. People say, you know, there's no majority in parliament for anything, there is a majority for going forward with this deal but minus the trap of a backstop. Speaker after speaker stood up to explain that point of view. That's what I believe, I think it's what at least half the Cabinet believes it. I think in secret it's probably the prime minister believes it. Let 's go ahead, go back to Brussels and get this thing done in a serious way that allows us to take back control.

AM: Are you seriously asking people to believe the prime minister could lose this vote in a massive way in the House of Commons and remain as prime minister and go and renegotiate again?

BJ: Of course. That is exactly what needs to – that's exactly what needs to happen. And I think that what people want to hear now is not stuff about leadership elections and personalities, what they

want to hear is is there a plan to get out of this mess? And you know, it is a mess.

AM: In that case, can you give me an absolute categorical promise here and now that you will not stand against Theresa May?

BJ: I'll give you an absolute categorical promise that I'll continue to advocate what I think is the most sensible plan..

AM: I'm asking you if you'll stand against her. Because you are going to stand against her.

BJ: I'll give you the most sensible plan to get out of this mess, and a plan which, by the way, I think the British people want to hear about.

AM: You would stand against her, you can see Number Ten in your grasp very, very quickly. And can I put it to you, you have spoken to other Conservatives offering them jobs in a Boris Johnson administration?

BJ: Well, I can tell you that if you – that's nonsense, but if you want to reduce this debate to personalities and –

AM: The personality of prime minister is not unimportant.

BJ: Personalities and political gossip, then that's obviously open to – I think actually what people want to hear is how do we get out of the mess of the backstop? And what you need to do is remit the Irish border problem to discussion in the FTA, do it with the FTA, withhold a substantial chunk of the money, and start now to make the preparations for coming out with no deal that we should have seriously made two and a half years ago.

AM: So...

BJ: I don't want no deal. I don't want no deal. I want to be very, very clear about this, I don't want no deal. I think what Steve said just now about the challenges is correct. I think they're probably exaggerated but there would be challenges. It's only if you prepare to come out on world trade terms, only if the EU believes that we're serious and willing to negotiate with them as sovereign

and equal partners that they will do the great deal that I think we can do. And that deal is indeed based on the Canada solution, that the prime minister herself advocated, if you remember, only in January last year.

AM: As I said at the beginning, you have been one of the people who has led the country to the place we are now. The clock is ticking. No deal is perfectly possible. If in the circumstances of no deal lots of people watching this programme, doing proper engineering jobs, working in the food processing industry, the car industry and so forth, up and down the country lose their jobs as a result of that, will you take personal responsibility?

BJ: Of course I will. And do not underestimate the deep sense of personal responsibility I feel for Brexit, and for everything that has happened. Do not underestimate how much I care about this. Because this is fundamental to our country, and it absolutely breaks my heart to think that after all that we've fought for, all that we campaigned for – all that Steve Barclay campaigned for, everybody campaigned for, everybody believes it, that we could consign ourselves to a future in which the EU effectively rules us in many, many respects and yet we have no say round the table in Brussels, that is an absurdity. We cannot go down that route. And unfortunately the current backstop arrangements would commit us to those arrangements. We have to change it. It's a relatively simple job to do. We can have a withdrawal agreement that does not contain the backstop. We can do much, much better than this.

AM: And of all the things that you did as Foreign Secretary, do you most bitterly regret your misspeaking in the case of Nazarin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who is still in prison, who's gone through an utterly, utterly appalling time. Her child is in a terrible state as well. And that's because you misspoke to the House of Commons.

BJ: Well, actually there are many difficult consular cases that we have with Iran, and the less that is said about them now frankly is better.

AM: People say that this is the real Boris, this is the man who speaks so vividly but is loose about your language and does not –

BJ: What you've just said, by the way, about that particular consular case is by no means accurate, as you well know. That particular case, I'm afraid, has – there are many, many ramifications to that case. I pay tribute to the Foreign Office, I pay tribute to everybody who is working on it, but it is a very, very difficult case and I can tell you that for a long time people have been doing their best to secure her release, and the release of several of the others.

AM: And to suggest that in the coming week people will be going around trying to remove the prime minister and put in Boris Johnson, or anybody else, as a tawdry, third rate gossip and not to be taken seriously.

BJ: All I would say to you, Andrew, is it is to reduce the vital debate about the future of our country, about the future of our democracy and our constitutional arrangements to relative trivialities of personalities.

AM: She's prime minister.

BJ: What people want to know, really what people want to know is is it really true that we've run out of time? Is it really true that we've run out of road? Is it really true there's no alternative? There is a very good alternative. And the really sad thing is – the sad thing is – the sad thing is –

AM: We really have run out of time.

BJ: - that we haven't yet in these negotiations tried hard enough or worked hard enough to deliver that alternative.

AM: Alright, Boris Johnson, you and I have run out of time, you and I have run out of road. Thanks very much indeed for talking to us.

(ends)