ANDREW MARR SHOW
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TOM WATSON

AM: Welcome Mr Watson. Can I start by asking about the new offer on Brexit that Labour has made this week. When you say that you want membership of a customs union in perpetuity, but some say over customs policy, what the Austrian Foreign Minister just called cherry picking, what do you mean by a say over trade policy?

TW: Look, it’s a serious offer, this. The letter last week came as a result of Theresa May’s offer at the dispatch box in the no confidence vote a week or two before. And what we’re really saying is come and meet us on our calls for closer economic realignment. You know, we think there’s only three options available for the country: either crash out with a hard Brexit, find consensus across the chamber, across all political parties, or have a public vote. And you know, when Theresa May made that offer it was kind of a surprise for us. We didn’t know she was going to do it. But we’re duty bound to listen to her and we think that was a serious offer, we’re very pleased that a number of Conservative MPs said it looks doable, and that the European negotiators have said it looks doable. So that’s really what we’re about. And that’s what last week represented.

AM: You may have heard James Brokenshire there. Doesn’t like everything about it but he says that talks should carry on. So this is a genuine, serious possibility of tilting towards a customs union between the Conservative Party and the Labour front bench. You’re going to talk this week.

TW: Yes, it’s very serious. And we need to make sure that – you know, we did have our reservations, it was very sort of uncharacteristic. We were surprised when Theresa May reached out, because you’d normally get wind that these things are happening. So it took us a bit of time to sort of establish the sort
of ground rules to this. But if she’s prepared to come and meet us on our genuine worry that this – and the current proposals will affect jobs, particularly in the manufacturing heartlands, where I am right now – then we’ll talk to her. But of course if she doesn’t go that way, if she chooses to go with the hard right people who want to crash out, then we’ve still got the people’s vote option.

AM: Well, I’ll come onto that, but there are two real problems with your proposal that I see at the moment. One, you can’t be in the customs union, or a customs union, and have an independent trade policy. That goes completely against the Treaty of Rome.

TW: Well, we were very pleasantly surprised and pleased when Donald Tusk leaned into the letter. He said it could be the basis of a new deal. So what we hope is, first of all we can get the prime minister to accept our proposals, and then if she agrees it, let’s go to the European negotiators and see whether we can find some leeway there.

AM: But you know they regard this as cherry picking. Is it a say you want, or actually a veto? And if it’s just a say, could that be alongside current arrangements? In other words, is there room for manoeuvre on this?

TW: Well, I think there’s always room for manoeuvre when negotiators are prepared to look at all options. And the tragedy of this is we were kind of locked out of this process for nearly two years. All the party leaders were essentially rejected by Theresa May. She thought she could do it on her own with her own party, and we’ve only just been given this offer in the last few weeks. So let’s try and find some space to see whether there is room for progress.

AM: So the second obvious problem with your proposal is what happens to free movement. One of your front bench colleagues has said in the past week that free movement is on the table. In
other words, you might accept free movement, which a lot of your own voters would not regard as Brexit.

TW: Well, look, we’re looking for a new set of arrangements, and it does seem to me that the domestic context across the EU, particularly in Germany, Italy and Spain, on the current free movement arrangements, are under question domestically. So it may be that a new deal around a customs union could refresh the talks about what free movement looks like. And you know, if you’re going to reopen negotiations let’s take a look at that.

AM: And is this Labour’s final offer, this or you insist on another referendum?

TW: Look, we’ve been pretty consistent on our red lines. We’re duty bound to take the prime minister’s offer of consensus talks seriously, and I hope that that letter represents that and we were pleased at the number of parliamentary colleagues in the Conservative Party think it is. But obviously if that fails, yes, the final option – because we think that’s the only way that we can deal with the impasse – is a public vote. And you know, John McDonnell said that this week. Keir Starmer’s said it consistently, and I’m saying it today as well.

AM: And that is definitely still on the table, the public vote?

Because some of your colleagues on the pro-referendum side of the party were livid about that letter, they thought it was brushing aside the likelihood or the speed of another referendum, and even threatening to walk out of the party as a result.

TW: Well, I’m sorry they were, because we have a very clear policy set by our conference, 100 delegates in a room for a whole day with Keir Starmer. You know, I could repeat over the mantra again about what that is, but it seems to me we’re now at the point where we can have meaningful talks to get a deal between the main political party leaders or the only way to break the impasse is a public vote, and that remains our policy.
AM: You’ve been in the Labour Party all your adult life. You’ve given a lot of service to it. Looking at where you are now as a party are you genuinely worried there may be a split or a splinter coming?
TW: I am worried about it, even though, you know, I read the media reports like you, Andrew, and I’ve said before, I think I’ve said it to you on your programme, that I hope people will stay and fight their cause. You know, because an electorally viable Labour Party addressing the issues that the future economy is going to bring workers in this country is always the best vehicle for social change. So I hope that we stay together as a party and that these sort of media rumours do not come to fruition.

AM: Well, one of the people, of course, who’s been the focus of these rumours is Luciana Berger, the MP for Liverpool Wavertree. She has been very, very upset, as you know, about the party’s handling of the anti-Semitism problem, and she has faced a vote of no confidence – now dropped – by her Wavertree constituency. Can I ask you, what do you think is going on in Liverpool Wavertree?
TW: She’s been bullied. That motion should never have been moved in her local party. The meeting to hear it should never have been heard. The net effect is there are obviously a small group of members in that area that are trying to drive her out as the MP. And I think that’s unacceptable, and Jeremy Corbyn this week, when we met our backbenchers, said on three occasions that these things are not done in his name. And I repeat that again: those people who even think they’re helping Jeremy Corbyn when they do this kind of stuff are not helping him, they’re harming the reputation of the Labour Party, they’re creating division and ultimately the person who will lose out the most is Jeremy Corbyn, because they’ll make it harder for him to be prime minister and get the political and economic change we want to see in this country.
AM: So the local party says, ‘we are only doing our job of holding our MP to account.’ John McDonnell, the Shadow Chancellor, said on the radio this week, ‘Luciana has been in the media associated with a breakaway party or whatever and hasn’t been clear in stating that she rejects – my advice to Luciana is just tell people you’re not supporting a breakaway party, you are sticking with the Labour Party.’ She is eight and a half months pregnant. It sounds as if more pressure is being piled on her life. What’s your response to that?

TW: Well, she is being put under pressure. She’s been the subject of anti-Semitic death threats, she’s been intimidated, she’s been bullied, and I don’t want any MP or any member of the Labour Party to feel that they’re being bullied or driven out. And what has happened to her is completely unacceptable, which is why I called for the local party to be suspended.

AM: But if she is associated with some possible breakaway party, in a sense isn’t John McDonnell right to be worried and right to be calling on her to renounce that idea?

TW: We’re all worried about the breakaway, because you know, we need unity in order to win the next general election, which we think will help the millions of people that have lost out by austerity. And I don’t want to lose Luciana, she’s not just a valued colleague and comrade but she’s also a friend, and I’ve seen the intolerable pressure she’s been put under. And I can only repeat to you, Andrew, this bullying has to stop. She’s not the only one who’s been subject to anti-Semitic abuse. And people who disagree with her, you know, in political parties we need a pluralism; we need to hear voices, have greater respect for people who disagree with each other. And it seems to me that not just the Labour Party but the whole country is slipping into division with hate-fuelled debates. That’s not going to help anyone, because there’s bigger challenges coming down the line after Brexit. You know, there are nine million jobs at risk when artificial intelligence starts to develop across different industrial sectors.
That’s what people want from political parties, they want us to address future challenges, and that’s not happening when we’re having these internal rows about bullying.

AM: Clearly the country, or parts of the country, are getting angrier and angrier over Brexit and from both sides MP, including Labour MPs, have had some very, very aggressive threats. They don’t talk about it in public, but there have been physical violence threats, there have been death threats. And there are even suggestions that is starting to affect people’s behaviour inside the House of Commons. Have you any insight to shed on this?

TW: Well, I know of one MP who has confidentially told me that they changed their vote on one particular key vote because they felt frightened for their own safety. You know, when you get to that point, you know, I would just say to people involved in politics, remember it’s in the last few years that we’ve had a dear and valued colleague that has been assassinated by a far right fanatic. So MPs are intimidated. And it’s really important that political leaders stand up and say we are not going to accept these threats of violence and intimidation, because it erodes our democracy and it’s going to drive good people who want to change the world out of politics, and nobody wants that.

AM: Are the police taking it seriously enough?
TW: Well, I hope they are. I don’t deal directly with them, our party managers do that. One thing I’ve suggested at my Shadow Cabinet is perhaps it’s time to look at a new security paradigm, where we provide security to MPs based on the threat level rather than the position they hold. And that might be one way that we can resource proper security to MPs.

AM: Jenny Formby, Labour’s General Secretary, upset some Jewish Labour MPS in particular when she was responding on the anti-Semitism affair earlier in the week, but she has now said that she is going to reveal the number of cases that the Labour Party’s
currently dealing with. Do you know what the figure is and can you tell us?
TW: I don’t know what the figure is, but I raised this point at our National Executive Committee. You know, we have changed our internal procedures, but there’s no point in changing the procedures unless we can build political trust again in the British Jewish community, and that requires greater transparency and I’m glad she’s ceded to the request of my colleagues on that.

AM: We’re running out of time, but Jenny Formby also said that she didn’t have any constitutional powers to suspend the Wavertree constituency. Is that true?
TW: I don’t know. I mean, she’s also confirmed to me that she is investigating members in that constituency, and actually I’ve had another complaint this evening that I need to follow up later today. So it does seem to me there are grounds for a suspension. I can only repeat again, I think Luciana is being bullied and there are local members in Liverpool Wavertree responsible for that, and others, and that is unacceptable and it is incumbent on political leaders to make sure that doesn’t happen.

AM: Tom Watson, thanks very much indeed for talking to us this morning.
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