ANDREW MARR SHOW
10TH FEBRUARY 2019
JAMES BROKENSHIRE, MP
Housing and Communities Secretary

AM: So Jeremy Corbyn has suggested a way through that could command a majority of votes in the House of Commons. Is the government in any way tempted by going towards a customs union?

JBL: Well what I would say is that we welcome the fact that Jeremy Corbyn wants to see a deal happening, as we profoundly do, as in the best interests of our country. And also acknowledges these issues in relation to the Withdrawal Agreement and the backstop point on Northern Ireland in particular. But on this issue of the customs union I think that what we would point to is the fact that the political declaration, what’s already been negotiated around customs arrangements, gives all the benefits of a customs union in terms of no tariffs, no quotas, no restrictions and indeed, our ability to be able to conduct our trade internationally and I think that’s the point.

AM: So you’re relatively close actually to what he is proposing. So what about a little bit of a further pivot towards the requests he’s made in that letter, which would allow Labour MPs to vote for a Withdrawal Agreement?

JB: Well I think the point though is that by going down this line of the customs union, and indeed other things that Jeremy Corbyn has hinted at, around the single market as well which seems to run contrary to what –

AM: That’s not in his letter.

JB: - well you know, but there are issues that he’s highlighted on that which seems to run contrary to things like free movement, which the Labour Party’s committed to ending. And I think the point on the customs union is that it seems to be why would we want to have a say over EU trade rather than our own trade? Our
own independent trade? And I think that’s an important point of difference.

AM: All of these things can be smoothed over at the edges and changed a little bit, that’s negotiations, but we’re heading towards no deal. British industry is getting very, very worried about that. It’s very close and agreeing a customs union with the Labour Party would be one escape mechanism. And all I’m trying to discover is whether that is one that as a party, as a Cabinet you are at all attracted by?

JB: Well we’ve said that we’re leaving the customs union and the single market. The point that I’m underlining is that the benefits that we have under the political declaration give in essence so much of the benefit of that free customs arrangement and therefore why it will be interesting to hear further from Jeremy Corbyn as to why he doesn’t see that as sufficient.

AM: You’re sounding emollient, you’re sounding like you want the conversation to carry on, but can I ask you in absolutely straight forward terms, Jeremy Corbyn has made a proposal to the government. Are you ruling it out or not?

JB: Well we will respond formally to Jeremy Corbyn’s letter, the points that he has raised and we want to continue discussion because we want to see the vote coming through in the House of Parliament to secure that majority actually getting a deal to happen, which is what the Prime Minister is absolutely focused on. Obviously there is further work this week with Steve Barclay, the Brexit Secretary meeting Michel Barnier tomorrow. They’re moving on to Strasbourg. The Foreign Secretary then also meeting his opposite number in Paris and then onto to Warsaw to see the Polish Prime Minister. And there is now a process in place with President Juncker obviously now seeing the Prime Minister again before the end of this month. And therefore a sense of yes, continued negotiations to see that we can get the necessary changes around the Withdrawal Agreement to see that we’re
dealing with the challenges that have been flagged to us in terms of the Houses of Parliament.

AM: Does the government now accept that that backstop is here to stay?
JB: Well, we accept that there is a need to uphold our commitments under the Belfast Good Friday Agreement. Something I believe very passionately –

AM: Yes sure, but is the backstop going to stay?
JB: Well the backstop underlines how we secure that seamless border on the island of Ireland, and indeed when we look at for example the Malthouse Proposals, even there there’s an acknowledgement that we need that insurance policy. We need to ensure that we have that smooth flow and upholding our duties.

AM: So to those of your colleagues, and you know who I’m talking about, who say bin the backstop, your answer is that is impossible?
HB: Well look, the point is, is that we need to see a free flowing arrangement in relation to the island of Ireland. Ensuring it is as frictionless as possible. Knowing what that means for Unionists and Nationalists in terms of how people live their lives there.

AM: I think you’re saying the backstop stays.
JB: Well there needs to be a backstop arrangement in place, an insurance policy that’s there.

AM: And yet you, like the rest of the government, voted for the Brady Amendment very, very recently which said ‘the Amendment requires the Northern Ireland backstop to be replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border.’ You voted for it to be replaced, you know it can’t be replaced, what is going on?
JB: Well the point is Andrew, is that the existing Withdrawal Agreement already contemplates alternative arrangements. That is there. That’s what we want to see further explored. Indeed getting the necessary legal changes to the Withdrawal Agreement,
we want to make sure we get a majority through the House of Commons so that we can actually see that deal happen.

AM: You can’t decide whether the backstop is in or out or what it means. You talk about alternative arrangements. Let me read you this. ‘No technology solution to address these issues has been designed yet, or implemented anywhere in the world let alone in such a unique and highly sensitive context as the Northern Ireland border.’ In other words it ain’t gonna happen. And yet Stephen Barclay is talking to Barnier tomorrow to try and made it happen.

JB: Yes, well we want to see—we want to, there are different routes to this.

AM: Do you agree with that analysis?

JB: Let me just explain. There are different routes that we’re looking at which obviously is the—what the sort of proposals that have come through from some of my Conservative colleagues on alternative arrangements. Or indeed the separate work that Geoffrey Cox is looking at on the changes legally—

AM: They’re not ready and they’re not going to happen.

JB: - that look at either a time limit or indeed an exit mechanism. And these are the ways that we properly need to explore this. So ultimately we get that deal, we get that agreement that we followed through on that negotiation.

AM: All of this has been rejected time and time again by the EU side. The technology changes are not possible, and that was the Prime Minister I was quoting. Your government knows that they can’t be changed, so you are really, really running out of options which is why a lot of people think your real strategy as a government is to run this right to the last minute and hope in a sense of panic MPs change their mind just a few days before we’re due to leave.

JB: Well there are a few things I would say to that. Firstly that both the EU and the UK governments want to see a deal happen.
That profoundly is in our national interest. Secondly, we obviously have -

AM: Doesn't mean it will.

JB: - Well, but there is a negotiation, but I think there is a real focus and intent on knowing that that is in the EU’s best interest, that’s in our country’s best interests as well. But just on this I suppose the point that you were raising about the timing of this, we obviously have this week a debate in parliament, a motion coming down, a substantive motion that the government will put forward, but I think it’s also important to stress that the government will commit that if the meaningful vote – in other words the deal coming back – has not happened by the 27th of February, then we would allow a further motion, votable in parliament to take place to give that sense of assurance as to the process moving forward as well in parallel.

AM: And to be absolutely clear, does that mean there will be a meaningful vote this month or not?

JB: Well, what I’m saying is if the meaningful vote has not happened, so in other words -

AM: Quite likely.

JB: - that you know things have not concluded, then parliament would have that further opportunity by no later than the 27th of February. And I think that gives that sense of timetable clarity and purpose on what we’re doing with the EU, taking that work forward and our determination to get a deal, but equally knowing that role that parliament very firmly has.

AM: It’s almost too late already, as you may have heard the Austrian Foreign Minister suggesting, for a lot of businesses. They are really running out of time, they’re running out of patience and we’re talking about running this forward into next month, just a little bit before we actually leave. This is highly irresponsible, is it not?
JB: Well what’s responsible is actually getting a deal and seeing that we have a smooth transition of us leaving the European Union. That’s where our focus is as a government. Equally, how we are in contact with businesses that export to Europe, around 145,000 HMRC has been in contact with them as well. But what gives certainty is a deal and that’s why we want to see people getting behind this – getting behind this process that we now have securing that and making it happen.

AM: Part of the preparation for no deal is the ferries coming in and out of places like Ramsgate. The Transport Secretary, Chris Grayling gave a contract to a company with no ferries and has now to cancel that contract. Do you, unlike some other Tory MPs, have confidence in the Transport Secretary? Is he competent?
JB: Chris Grayling has done a huge amount of work to prepare for our departure from the European Union and on the ferry issue it’s important to note that 90% of that capacity actually is with two other companies. Brittany Ferries and DFDS. So it’s about this 10% where no public funds have actually been paid out in relation to this, and indeed, other work that Chris is doing on things like aviation. Ten aviation agreements concluded with countries like the US and Canada to ensure that we have that position in place.

AM: Do you think he’s competent?
JB: Yeah, I think Chris has done a really tough job really, really positively to ensure that we are well prepared, so I strongly endorse all the work that Chris has been doing.

AM: Let’s talk about local authorities which come into your brief. You are writing to local authorities to get them to prepare for no deal. What exactly are they supposed to do?
JB: Well there’s a range of work that local authorities are doing. To look at their own for example, their own workforce planning, so think about issues on social care provision. On other steps that
may need to be needed for example on trading standards to implement different changes.

AM: Let me just stop you there. So in the event of no deal you’re concerned that social care facilities might not have enough workers to carry on operating as they are now?
JB: What we’re looking at is what the long term implications might be. What changes may take place, ensuring that processes are there and in place. Indeed why I’ve committed additional funds to local authorities.
AM: What does this mean? In real terms what do you mean?
JB: Well what we’re looking at is whether over time there may be changes in the people who are working in different places. Whether that’s in local government or support services too.

AM: So that means that there are people from the EU working in local government who may not be working in local government after no deal, and you’re looking at other ways of recruiting people or what?
JB: Well it’s looking to giving the assurance. Because those people who are from the EU who are here, giving that assurance to them that they do not need to change, the work that Sajid Javid has been taking forward in relation to giving that assurance. So actually about information, about certainty for them so that they are well prepared and ensure that we get that strong continuity.

AM: And this is taking people who might be working on, I don’t know, council tax, or refuse collection whatever in local authority offices and moving them into new offices so that they can speak to members of the public worried about what happens after no deal?
JB: Well it’s about communication for example to small businesses and therefore is there are changes that need to take place that is well communicated on things like trading standards. The councils may have ports with them. That’s why we have committed £56.5
JAMES BROKENSHIRE, MP

million that I announced in the course of the last few weeks to support councils on their preparation.

AM: Did you write to the Chancellor asking for more money for this?
JB: Well I’m not going to comment on correspondence that’s leaked or speculation on that, but we have had funds that are there, why I have committed that £56.5 million.

AM: Forget the letter. Do you need more money?
JB: Well we have got that money that’s going to councils for that preparation. And so £20 million that is for the immediate pressures this year, actually responding to challenges that councils gave to me about what they’re doing now, and then for the next year further funds that are being put in place there. So actually you know ensuring that money is going to councils now. That was my determination, that’s what’s happening.

AM: Are you absolutely sure, looking at the audience, looking at the camera, looking at me that we are going to leave the EU at the end of March?
JB: Yeah, I am
AM: Absolutely sure?
JB: I am determined
AM: No delay?
JB: - that we will leave the European Union and we will leave on time. That is what the Prime Minister is determined to achieve as well and actually having that certainty as to the departure is focusing minds. It is seeing that people are really gripping this and that we can get that deal, because ultimately we need to give effect to the referendum result, that’s what we want to do and I want to see us leave well and smoothly and that’s where the focus is.

AM: But we’re not ready, are we?
JB: Well there are – obviously there are still steps that are currently being put in place, of course, but that’s why we’re looking for example parliament sitting not having the February recess so that we have that extra space in time with other legislative processes there. But clearly there is steady work that’s going on, 10,000 civil servants that are now focused on that and indeed on things like the border. Border Force ramping up and remaining on schedule to get those extra 900 Border Force operators in place.

AM: We will watch and see. Now there’s been a lot of comment this week about one of your colleagues, Sir Christopher Chope stopping legislation which prevented female genital mutilation on really vulnerable girls going ahead. What’s your reaction? Should he be disciplined for that?

JB: Yeah, I think it’s really shocking on such a serious issue. Female genital mutilation is something that we have got to confront. We have got to do more. It is hugely disappointing that this Bill is not able to proceed. That’s why we are now looking urgently to get government time for legislation to make this happen. Obviously, Sir Christopher’s own association is investigating this, I think that’s the best place for this to be dealt with, but we are determined to take action to confront and combat FGM, that’s why we saw this legislation as really positive, had cross party support and why we’re determined to take further action.

AM: Are you proud that he’s a colleague of yours?

JB: Well I’m just hugely disappointed and I understand that Christopher feels a lot about the process issues, about debate, about how parliament operates, but on this I think that – I hope he will even reflect because this is a hugely sensitive and serious issue, we need to make change and that’s what we’ll do.

Ends