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AM: Now one thing that changed last week was that the Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn opened talks on a so called soft Brexit, a customs union with Tory MPs. Are we moving towards a Commons agreement on a different kind of deal to the Prime Minister’s? And if that’s true, does it mean Labour is once more putting another referendum on the backburner? John McDonnell, the Shadow Chancellor joins me from Dundee where he’s speaking at the Scottish Labour Conference. Welcome, Mr McDonnell.

It was reported this week that Ian Lavery, Chair of the Labour Party told Jeremy Corbyn during Shadow Cabinet that if he persisted in pushing a second referendum or another referendum on Brexit he would never be Prime Minister. Is he right about that?

JM: Well, I don’t comment on what goes on in Shadow Cabinet. That’s confidential and that’s the tradition of it. Ian and a number of people quite rightfully in the debate that we’ve had have said very clearly that you know, we’ve got to abide by exactly what we’ve said at Labour Party Conference which is we go through the sequence of respecting the referendum, preventing a reckless deal that Theresa May is bringing forward. Preventing a no deal. Looking to see how we can construct a deal which we think could protect jobs and the economy, and failing that going for a General Election or failing that going back to the people. And Ian’s on the same page as everybody else in abiding by our Conference decision. And this week, this week we thought this would be the week in which Theresa May brought back for a meaningful vote a different deal, a new deal. It doesn’t look like that. It looks as though she’s bringing back the same deal, so I think it will have the same result and it’ll be thrown out. And then we’ll move into a
situation where we – at least we can try and vote down a no deal and then I think yes, further negotiations will take place. My view is everything we do this week has got to prevent a no deal and a bad deal. Other discussions will take place but we’ll always, we’ll always, exactly as our Party Conference said, we’ll always keep on the agenda if necessary, if parliament can’t agree we’ll have to go back to the people. We’ll be forced to.

AM: But meanwhile, as I said earlier on, Jeremy Corbyn’s been talking to Conservative MPs about a different kind of Brexit. The so called Norway plus or customs union based Brexit and a lot of people think there is a majority for that in the House of Commons. So when Theresa May says, if you don’t go for my deal you might end up with a much softer Brexit you might not consider Brexit at all, she’s right, isn’t she?

JB: Well, she’s right in the sense that we put forward our own proposals a couple of weeks ago. Now that was rejected by the House of Commons. We never got a majority for that. But we’re in a different situation now because I think a lot of MPs were thinking she’d go back to Brussels and at least come back with something different and, as I say, I think she looks as though she’s just going to put forward the same thing that was defeated or near enough the same thing, that was defeated only a short while ago so heavily in the historic defeat in parliament. So naturally MPs are looking to see either other options. We’ve put our option up there. Jeremy’s willing to talk to anybody and of course we’ve kept the option of going back to the people as well.

AM: If you had the choice, and you may have, of your kind of Brexit deal or another referendum, which would you prefer?

JM: We’ll see as the debate goes on. What we’ve said and I voted for it, I wanted our deal to go through parliament because at least that would protect us from what Theresa May’s putting forward
which would damage – well damage my constituents and damage the economy and threaten the jobs of the people right the way across the country, and at least we'd prevent a no deal. And I think that's the situation we're in. We've got to do everything we possibly can at the moment to end those two options, close those down, then we're into a wider debate, but as I say if parliament can't then come to a conclusion that option of going back for some form of confirmatory vote or going back to the people, it's still there because I can't see any other way of breaking the logjam.

AM: Two questions about the proposed deferral of Brexit beyond the end of this month. First of all, if the Commons votes to delay Brexit, do you think the Prime Minister is obliged to go back to the EU and ask for a delay? And second, how long do you think an ideal delay would be?

JM: Well, it looks as though she's going to have to anyway, because no matter what the votes are this week it's going to be very difficult for the government to get through the necessary legislation. You know, 600 Statutory Instruments, we're only a third of the way through as far as I can see. The main legislation itself would have to be debated. I think she's got herself - she's got us all into this situation where delay after delay after delay has meant she – I think she's almost forced to go back to the European Union. And then it will be up to the European Union. What they've said is maybe three months, but there's no point in having a delay if then she's going to run down the clock and come back with the same deal again. This is the mess that the Prime Minister's got us all into.

AM: Emily Thornberry, the Shadow Foreign Secretary suggested a two to three month delay only. That would mean, would it not, that your policy of having another referendum was also impossible? There wouldn't be enough time for that.
JM: We’re also into hypotheticals now, but the issue for me this week is look, we’ve got to vote down Theresa May’s deal. We’ve got to close down completely the option of a no deal. The Prime Minister then will I think almost inevitably then have to come back and look for some form of deferment, just on the logistics of all of this. I don’t think the European Union will want a long delay and they might provide us with a three month delay only if we can demonstrate that we can use that time usefully. But it’s no good the Prime Minister going for a delay and just running down the clock any more.

AM: How long do you want though? How long do you want?

JM: As long as necessary and I think – well I think we – I think, myself, we could agree the Labour’s deal within a matter of weeks. The European Union has looked positively on that and in all the discussions that we’ve had they see that as the foundation of a proper negotiation. And to be frank, that’s what the Prime Minister should have done two years ago. She’s got us into this mess, it will be Labour that will have to get the country out of this mess. And again, if parliament can’t then agree the terms that Labour’s put forward there’s always that option of going back to the people.

AM: It sounds like that is falling off, as it were, the end of your sentences it’s on the backburner now. We thought that was the new policy, but it doesn’t sound like it is.

JM: No, no don’t misinterpret this, Andrew. It’s always been integral to our policy, unanimously agreed by our Conference. And our Conference demonstrated exactly in that debate the sequence that we would follow, the options that we would pursue, all in the interests of the country. And Jeremy talking to Conservative MPs and others is about putting the interests of the country before the
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interest of party. And that’s what we’re doing. And you’re seeing that in the discussions we’re all having across the House of Commons Chamber.

AM: This is complicated and it’s hypothetical, but can I just test what I think is your preferred way forward which is that you get a version of your kind of Brexit agreed by the House of Commons, that is a so called softer Brexit, a customs union based Brexit and then a delay of enough time to allow that to be agreed with the EU and that would then be put to another referendum. Is that the way forward as you see it at the moment?

JM: Not necessarily. What I want to do is make sure we completely are faithful to what our Conference decided, which is whatever we do we’ve got to prevent the Tories driving through, Theresa May driving through some form of Brexit deal which will damage our economy and undermine jobs. And that’s what we’re doing this week. If that requires a bit of delay to have a discussion and negotiation about the deal we’ve put forward, which would, we believe, protect jobs and the economy, so be it. The Prime Minister might be forced into that. But we’ve also said if parliament can’t agree, if we have to break the logjam, yes, we’ll keep the option available to us of going back to the people. Now I’m hoping, I’m hoping we can work on a cross party basis, on the basis of the deal that Labour has put forward, but again sometimes some people will say whatever deal you agree the only reason I’ll vote for it if it does go back to the people. So we’re going to be in that sort of situation where we might have to go for a confirmatory vote about any deal.

AM: Let me ask you about one other thing that’s happened this week. The Equality and Human Rights Commission announced that it was thinking of investigating the Labour Party into anti-Semitism. Would you welcome that investigation?
JM: Yes, and let’s get on with it now. Because I think one, I think – I’m hoping we’ll get a clean bill of health about how we’re handling things. If there’s issues that the EHRC can advise us on, I welcome that, because I want us to be a shining example of how you tackle issues like anti-Semitism, both within your own party but also in wider society. So let’s get on with that now and let’s get it done because we’ll all learn lessons from it and I hope that other political parties as well in how they deal with the racism that they’ve experienced in their own party, learns from this too.

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