ANDREW MARR SHOW, 10TH JUNE, 2018

DAVID LIDINGTON, MP
MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE

AM: David Lidington, the Cabinet Office Minister is in reality the nearest thing that Theresa May has to a Deputy Prime Minister and he’s with me now. Rough week?

DL: I think it’s pretty much par for the course. You know you’ve got a parliament arithmetic that’s always –

AM: It’s a pretty rough course though, isn’t it?

DL: parliamentary arithmetic’s always difficult. You don’t have an overall majority. But whenever I’ve sat down with the PM, and when she’s talked about Europe or about our domestic policies, on housing and infrastructure and so on, I mean frankly she’s somebody who tends to put aside all the froth and the commentary and speculation and focus upon the substance. What’s going to make a difference, what’s going to give the best deal for the British people?

AM: Well let’s get rid of all the froth and focus on the substance in that case. Is it true that this week the Prime Minister changed the position on the backstop to put in a hard date after she had been fronted up by David Davis?

DL: Well as always with these things, Andrew there are discussions between the PM and the relevant ministers about precise working. We’ve got a proposal that we’ve published that we’ve put to the European Commission. It’s been greeted, as I would rather have hoped, with them saying well, this is a sensible sort of start for us to have a look at –
DAVID LIDINGTON, MP

AM: Which we’re going to turn down?

DL: to negotiate. Well no, I would be a bit worried if we presented a proposal and the Commission instantly, you know, shouted hallelujah and said we’re willing to sign now. This is a negotiation so we’ve put something on the table, Michel Barnier’s responded constructively, we now need to get down and talk. David Davis is over in Brussels tomorrow to continue those conversations.

AM: But you changed the wording after David Davis had gone in. At any point in this week did you fear that you were going to lose not only David Davis but a great slew of pro-Brexit ministers?

DL: I’ve never worried too much about you know, what the reports are in the press. Usually it’s from various aides about what may or not happen. When I’ve talked to David, when I’ve talked to other colleagues, whichever side they’ve campaigned on in the Europe referendum what they’re all wanting to do is support the PM in getting a deal that protects jobs and prosperity and growth in this country that keeps a good ambitious trading relationship and security relationship with our European neighbours. But also allows us to try to take advantage of opportunities to trade around the world.

AM: Same question I asked Keir Starmer. Do you accept that with the EU, as a customs union, there is going to have to be a border?

DL: Well there’s going – what we’re proposing on customs is two possible models that get around the issue of the Irish border where you know, we’ve given a very clear commitment. No hard border on the island of Ireland, and those would involve either us collecting the tariff on behalf of the EU, or a way of managing possible tariff differences on the island, without there being border checks.
AM: So there are two things here. First of all there’s Boris Johnson’s comment this week that this Irish border issue is now gumming up and retarding the entire negotiation. His view it’s the tail wagging the dog, he said.

DL: The Irish border is important. Anybody who like me you know grew up with the Troubles as a background knows that stability in Northern Ireland is important and I’ve talked to traders on both sides of the border, I know how important having no border, an open border is. But you know the point – the whole Cabinet, Andrew endorsed the PM’s Mansion House speech in which she said in terms securing no hard border on the island of Ireland is a fundamental –

AM: Was absolutely crucial?

DL: - negotiating principle as we approach these talks with the EU.

AM: Absolutely, and as you said there’s two proposals on the table at the moment from the government about ways to resolve this. We’re going to get a White Paper in what, about four weeks or so on this?

DL: Oh yeah, we’ll be meeting – as the Prime Minister said, we’re meeting in July to go through this in greater detail. It’s going to be a very – a detailed, very wide ranging White Paper, so it’s really important ministers thrash this out together and we get the detail right.

AM: And we’ll get this in about a month’s time, as I say, that seems to be the word. In that White Paper will we have a resolution as to which of those two answers to the Irish border problem the government now favours?
DAVID LIDINGTON, MP

DL: Yes, we’ve consistently said that we will be putting forward in the White Paper our proposed way forward on customs but along with many other details of how we see the future relationship between ourselves and our European neighbours.

AM: And only if that fails does the so called backstop come into play? I’m slightly confused about the language the government has used about this backstop now. I read it out: “The UK expects the future arrangement to be in place by the end of December, 2021 at the latest.” What does the word, ‘expects’ mean?

DL: Exactly what it says.

AM: It might not happen.

DL: If you look at what’s going to have to happen we know that in the autumn of this year we’re going to need to get agreement on the text of the Withdrawal Agreement which includes the backstop arrangement for Ireland.

AM: As you expect or hope that it’ll be over by 2021?

DL: Alongside that, Andrew the House of Commons and the European Parliament are both very clear they will need clarity about what it is we are transitioning to at the end of the implementation period. So that will be part of the consideration of both parliaments about what we do. I mean when we get to the end of the implementation period, yeah we think that if we need the backstop – we hope we won’t – that we’ll be able to switch to the new arrangements seamlessly, but if not it’s there for a short time and the EU itself has always said – the EU itself, Andrew has always said you cannot have a permanent solution on the basis of a withdrawal agreement.
DAVID LIDINGTON, MP

AM: It’s just, it’s delightfully waffly, soft kind of language. Expect hopes. That’s the kind of thing if you’re wife’s calls you in the pub and says what time are you going to be home? I expect to be home by 7 knowing jolly well it will be 8 o’clock or 9. It’s that kind of language.

DL: It’s being absolutely sensible and reasonable. If we get a good deal with the EU that needs ratification in national parliaments, one of them might delay, there might be an election in one country before they get round to it.

AM: Here’s a very, very clear way of resolving this. Can you be absolutely sure here and now that by the time of the next election in 2022 we will have left the EU completely?

DL: We will have left the EU at the end of the March 2019. I mean that’s what the treaty says.

AM: But in terms they’ll be no backstop by what I mean. There’ll be no backstop by the time of the next election?

DL: Oh certainly. I mean I know the PM’s intention, my hope that everybody is working towards getting this sorted as soon as we possibly can. We are expecting to get the withdrawal agreement sorted this autumn and to have agreed a very ambitious new economic and security partnership with the EU that it’s in their interests as well as ours to put in place as rapidly as possible.

AM: Now all this takes place against the background of a government that doesn’t quite seem to agree with itself about the essence of Brexit. I’m going to give you a little favour – a quiet relaxing time now and play you a little bit of Boris Johnson’s comments at a private dinner that the audio quality isn’t brilliant but the words are pretty clear. Let’s hear them.
Boris Johnson PM
Foreign Secretary
Speaking on Wednesday

“The Treasury, which is basically the heart of Remain, just sees the risks.
What they don’t want is friction at the borders.
They don’t want any disruption of the economy.
So they’re sacrificing all the medium and long-term.
Gains out of fear of short-term disruption.
Project fear is really working on them.
They’re terrified of this nonsense.
It’s all total mumbo jumbo.”

AM: Okay, well the crucial thing there I think is that he was going for the Treasury as the heart of project Remain and project fear and you know and I know that it’s not just Boris Johnson, lots of Brexiteers look at Philip Hammond and they say, this is the man who is gumming up the works when it comes to Brexit, who is delaying everything.

DL: That’s not a picture I recognise. I mean I’ve worked with Philip for quite a few years in government now. I mean he’s somebody who has accepted the verdict of the British people in the referendum. He is working extremely hard to deliver on that and to deliver on it in a way that looks after jobs and prosperity in this country. And that’s a commitment the entire government is behind.

AM: I mean he’s also very upset about the kind of – the tone of these negotiations and he’s hoping that Theresa May takes a more combative tone at the next Summit. He’s even said that Donald Trump would do a better job. What would it be like if Donald Trump was running the Brexit negotiations David?

DL: I think I’m very happy for the American people to take decisions about President Trump and we respect that and we work with elected leaders of the United States. The British public have
DAVID LIDINGTON, MP

got a British Prime Minister and if you look at Theresa May’s record, December last year, March this year, everybody was saying in the media, oh it’s all going to end in disaster. She got good deals at both those European Summits and I’m very confident she’ll do that again.

AM: Sure. But since then you know that the mood music, the words from Brussels have been increasingly tough, sometimes very aggressive and very unpleasant. This is the moment surely when the Prime Minister does need to take a more combative tone.

DL: I think anybody who’s had dealings with Theresa May in public or private knows that that she doesn’t shirk from being tough. It’s the substance of the toughness that matters, not a particular rhetoric, particular speeches and I think the public appreciate that, that’s why though we’ve been in government for eight years now, we were seven points ahead in the most recent opinion poll.

AM: Are you expecting a meltdown in these talks?

DL: I’m expecting the talks to move forward. No, I’m not expecting a meltdown. What I’m expecting, I’m working towards supporting the PM towards is to get a successful deal as she did at the Summit in December, as she did at the Summit in March and I hope all my colleagues in parliament will get behind her in the same way.

AM: You’ll have seen the stories all over the papers about Arron Banks and the Russian Ambassador and goldmines and all the rest of it. Now I know that they were not the official Leave campaign, they were not connected to the Conservative government but nonetheless, as somebody carrying out the result of that Brexit referendum is there anything about that that makes you uneasy?
DAVID LIDINGTON, MP

DL: Well, clearly they are serious allegations, but we have in this country a system where there are independent agencies to look at allegations of malpractice, you know. Quite rightly ministers can’t either initiate or stop any such investigation so I’d say those who’ve got the evidence let them take it to the relevant authorities and let it be looked into.

AM: And on a related matter, because this is also connected to the Trump campaign, we mentioned Trump already, are you concerned as a government now that we’re heading towards a trade war with the United States?

DL: I don’t think a trade war does anybody any good. I think that we need to find

AM: - but he wants one apparently.

DL: I think that the lessons of trade wars in the past are that everybody loses so I think we need to work with the United States and with our European partners and other powers like Japan to try to find multilateral solutions to this because frankly I believe that ordinary families benefit from free trade.

Ends