ANDREW MARR SHOW, 11TH FEBRUARY, 2018

Anna Soubry, MP
Conservative
and Chuka Umunna, MP
Labour

AM: Last week, Anna Soubry the former Tory minister said that if the Brexiteers took control of her party she might have to leave it and form some kind of new alliance. Pretty extraordinary stuff. Is this practical politics? Is it a real threat to Theresa May’s Brexit plans? To try to find out I’m joined by Anna Soubry and the kind of person she’d like to form an alliance with, the Labour MP Chuka Umunna.

Now there the two of you are, cosily friendly on the sofa. An awful lot of people, 17 plus million, who voted for Brexit are going to say, there you go, they haven’t accepted the referendum result. Even now they’re trying to frustrate it. This is an unholy parliamentarian plot.

AS: Well what I say is I’m interested in making sure that we get the best deal that we possibly can. That we get a Brexit that absolutely puts our economy at the front and the most important thing –

AM: So you accept Brexit’s going to happen?

AS: The most important thing is that we continue to put our country’s interests first and foremost and that actually is our constituents’ interests. We both voted for Article 50 to be triggered. People often forget that. And the other thing that I would say to you –

AM: I’m just rolling my eyebrows. I don’t know if you saw them. I was asking you, do you think Brexit will definitely happen?

AS: Will it definitely? I genuinely don’t know what is going to happen.
AM: So it might be stopped?
AS: Well, it would not be – I’ll tell you who might stop it and that’s the people of this country. We won’t stop it. It is the people. We gave the people a referendum to start this process –
AM: And they voted for it.
AS: - and exactly, but we should also be clear –
CU: There’s no – look, there is no majority in the House of Commons for us simply to jump off a cliff. Nobody voted to be poorer. You’re right to refer to that referendum in 2016, but nobody voted for us to jump off a cliff. And the point here is increasingly what you’re seeing is people seeking to put ideology before the national interest. The ultimate example of that is the Good Friday Agreement. We know that if we come out of the customs union and the single market all sides will be very clear that you will potentially threaten the Good Friday settlement. Are we really going to put that all at risk for ideology? So if this – however this pans out the national interest has to come first. And that’s why you have people working across parties to make sure that’s the case.

AM: Can I just walk through the democracy side of this, which is it seems to me that it would tear a hole in our democracy if Brexit was reversed without the public having another say at some point. So if Brexit was to be stopped there would have to be a second referendum. But we know perfectly well, ’cause you’re sitting there saying so, Jeremy Corbyn won’t call one and we know that Theresa May won’t call one for obvious reasons as well. Therefore, unless there is a majority in the House of Commons for something that the party leaderships are against it won’t happen. That is not practical politics, is it?

AS: Why?
CU: Well hang on just a minute.
AM: Well I’m asking.
CU: You can’t - this whole thing in the end it will be the people that decide it. You’re absolutely right and to my mind you can’t fault the will of the people if they’re the ones that get the final say. But in the end parliament is not a bystander in this process.

AS: No.

CU: Parliament gets to determine what will happen. Now my own personal view is I would like to see the people get the final say with the option to remain in. But at the end of the day this is for parliament to determine.

AM: And your joint determination is that parliament will have a clear, decisive vote –

AS: Yes.

AM: - on whatever terms Theresa May reveals to the country in due course?

AS: Yes. And all options must be available to parliament as well. And the real thing is this. If this government doesn’t get this right it will end up in a position whereby the majority of members of parliament putting their constituents first, will find themselves unable to vote for a withdrawal agreement and then the government will find its –

AM: Then it’s out with no agreement. Then it really is the cliff edge.

AS: No, no, no.

CU: Well no it isn’t.

AS: There are options and that’s our point.

CU: It isn’t, that’s the point.

AM: What are the options, because people say to me again and again, if parliament votes down whatever deal Theresa May gets then that is leaving the EU. Because we triggered Article 50, we leave without a deal, what’s the –

CU: Remember, we secured a meaningful vote before Christmas. Dominic Grieve tabled the amendment, there was a majority in parliament for it. And what it ensures is that parliament doesn’t
just give the government a blank cheque, but we get to actually have a voice and influence all the different scenarios.

AS: And when we went over to Europe one of the big messages – and we saw lots and lots of disparate people – one of the big messages was that if we don’t take a withdrawal agreement there are other options. That’s not just staying in the European Union. It’s also the Norwegian model. And the big mistake that’s being made is that the debate in cabinet is between Canada and Canada plus, plus, plus. When it’s obvious –

AM: So Norway’s gone in Cabinet?

AS: Exactly, and that’s a huge mistake because from the European point of view it’s a choice between Norway and Canada and we’ve made a mistake with red lines.

CU: It’s a delusion that you can have your cake and eat it. You can’t have your cake and eat it. It doesn’t matter how many times you say you can have it, you can’t.

AM: Theresa May has made it clear that she’s going to come out with her clear preferred option for how we leave the EU later this month. We’re going to see it. What could she say that would calm you both down?

AS: Oh from my point of view I want to see EFTA. That is what I want to see. Absolutely back on –

AM: So we are still inside a free trade area?

AS: Yes. So it’s the European Free Trade Area, that makes us members of the EEA in the Norwegian model. The Norwegians have control over their fisheries policy, their agricultural policy. I also want us to stay in the, not a, I’m not messing about withy words, the customs union for exactly the reasons –

AM: So that’s not going to happen is it?

AS: Why?

AM: The Cabinet are never going to agree that, are they?
ANNA SOUBRY MP AND CHUKA UMUNNA, MP

AS: Well if they don’t, as Chuka says, not only is it bad for our economy but it also fundamentally undermines the peace process -

CU: Yes.

AS: - that was achieved. And this is really important.

AM: It’s hard to see how she could produce a deal that you will back. Chuka, can I ask the same sort of question to you about Jeremy Corbyn? You’ve heard him absolutely rule out a second referendum, absolutely rule out a customs union. What more – and yet we hear rumours, there’s kind of stories in the papers that perhaps behind the scenes he’s slightly more open minded. Are you making any kind of progress with the Labour leadership?

CU: I think Jeremy is open minded. Over the summer, last summer he moved us to a position where we would stay in the single market and the customs union for transition, but I have to say, Andrew, I cannot conceive of circumstances where Labour MPs are marshalled to go through the lobby and vote against us staying in the customs union and the single market with the likes of Jacob Rees-Mogg, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove. I cannot see Jeremy saying to Labour MPs ‘we’re going through the lobby with those guys and damaging – damaging the interests of our constituents’.

AM: We’re running out of time. One really important last question to both of you. Is it conceivable that you can get a majority? Do you really believe you have a majority in the House of Commons on the Tory side and the Labour side coming together to defeat the kind of Brexit the Prime Minister wants?

AS: If she’s not careful, yes. There’s already a big shift –

AM: That smashes the party system.

AS: Well it may well do, but there is a real shift amongst what I call Leaverlites, reluctant remainers who are seeing the attraction
of EFTA on the backbenchers. And finally can I just say this. It’s really important.
AM: Okay.
AS: I wish Chuka would come into the lobby with me but he doesn’t. There was a very good police settlement last week, but you went and voted against, Chuka. And that’s important.

CU: And Anna doesn’t vote with me on the NHS.
AS: Exactly. On Brexit this is bigger than anything.

CU: But this is bigger than party.

AM: You are closer to each other, not just physically now but you are closer to each other politically.
AS: We’ll have to move down the sofa.
AM: You are closer to each other politically than you are –
AS: On Brexit, absolutely.
AM: You are closer to him than you are to Jacob Rees-Mogg. You are closer to her than you are to John McDonnell. Sure?

CU: I just don’t see it. You’re making this about -
AS: I’m not denying that.
AM: She’s not denying it.
CU: - individuals and parties and the point about this –
AM: Don’t be ungallant, Chuka Umunna.
AS: You can’t win that way.
CU: This is bigger, it’s bigger than party.
AS: It’s bigger than any of that.
CU: We won’t be forgiven by future generations if we play party politics.
AM: Is this the beginning of a new alliance?
AS: No, I mean look, this is – as Chuka says, this is the issue upon which we are absolutely united and that’s the most important thing, ’cause we’re putting our country and our constituents first. And that’s what everybody else has got to do. Not just MPs, but
also British business has got to speak up for the economic Brexit that everybody's crying out for.

AM: Time’s up. You heard it here first folks, thanks both very much indeed.

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