ANDREW MARR SHOW
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DAMIAN HINDS, MP
Education Secretary

AM: More resignations to come?

DH: Well look, we’re in the latter stages of this negotiation, about 95% of the way through. The last 5% is always the hardest. The last fifteen minutes of a negotiation is always the hardest bit of the negotiation, so -

AM: So yes, more resignations to come?

DH: We have to see what comes back and of course everybody in parliament will be looking at that very closely and they need to think about, you know, what’s right for the future of our country. They also need to think about what the alternatives are, and actually I’m very confident the deal that comes back will be a good one and it will be one that Members of Parliament will want to support.

AM: Well let me put to you directly what Joe Johnson said in his resignation letter. He said: “To present the nation with a choice between two deeply unattractive outcomes. Vassalage and chaos is a failure of British statecraft on a scale unseen since the Suez Crisis.”

DH: Well, look, you know, Joe puts his points in that particular way. Actually what I see is something different. We had a referendum, we had a clear result. It was a very participatory campaign; it was a high turnout, a clear question and a clear result. We now have to deliver on that and we have to come up with the best deal that works for people’s jobs, works for people’s families. It’s not necessarily going to be something that you know,
everybody's going to think is absolutely perfectly what they want, but that's the nature of these things. There are some trade-offs.

AM: You've lost seven Cabinet and ministerial colleagues over this. There's a sense the whole thing is fracturing and crumbling just at the moment. Why do you think that might be?

DH: Well look, it is a very complex thing and you know it's not the first time that Europe has been something which has caused very, very, intense debate in British politics, and people have very strong views. But what the Prime Minister is doing is charting a course to make sure that we have an arrangement, a future arrangement with the EU which works for our economy, delivers on the referendum and keeps the integrity of the United Kingdom.

AM: Let's look at where we are. As I said earlier on there was a sense that this week just past there was going to be a special Cabinet meeting and it was going to be presented to Cabinet. That didn't happen. Are you clearing your diaries, are you ready to clear your diaries for another meeting next week where you'll get the deal?

DH: Well of course we have to be ready, whenever the time is. But the negotiations have to –

AM: But do you think it will be next week?

DH: - the negotiations have to finish and you know it's got to be a good deal. It can't be just, you know, a deal has to be finished at any cost. You know we have to have the maximum possible leeway. Lots and lots of different aspects to consider, to trade off and as I say when that comes back of course people will look at it very, very closely. They need to think about what the alternatives are as well. It's no good just not liking individual aspects, you've got to have in mind – if you're going to take that view you've got
to have in mind a realistic, viable, deliverable alternative. I think people are going to be getting behind this deal and say, yeah, let’s get on with it, it’s right for our economy, let’s move forward.

AM: You talk about the timeline but Dominic Raab was saying that this really had to be done by the end of this month, so three weeks away, you know. There’s not that much time left. Assuming some kind of deal is agreed, we don’t know, next week and it goes to Cabinet and assuming Cabinet swallows it, again we don’t know, but if it does, what happens then? Dominic Raab goes back to Brussels and gets that signed off and then it comes to the House of Commons. Is that how it works?

DH: Well, look. The exact timing –

AM: Just talk me through the choreography.

DH: - of these things. Of course we want this to happen as soon as possible. There is of course the March deadline. There are other reasons to want to do things as quickly as possible. Yes, of course it’s something that has to be agreed at European level among the 27, and then we have the meaningful vote in parliament.

AM: In clear terms, would the Cabinet be signing off something that had already been agreed with the EU or do agree amongst yourselves and then send it back to the EU?

DH: Well, look, it’s in the nature of these things that you have a lead negotiating team. By the way that’s true for the European Union as well. But there’s also a level of you know, ratification agreement and that’s true for the EU 27. In our country we have Cabinet government and then we have parliamentary sovereignty and all of these are stages that we have to go through.
AM: So Cabinet will see it, the negotiators in Brussels will see and eventually Parliament will see it. When will all the rest of us see this deal? Will it be published?

DH: Well we already know parts of what we are trying to do.

AM: Yeah, but the whole thing? When will the whole thing be published?

DH: Well the whole thing of course will be known, will be known in parliament because we’ll be debating it and there will be – of course there will be a national debate as well as the debate that happens in the House of Commons. I’ve no doubt on your programme you’ll be debating it and on many other programmes.

AM: But it will be published and you’ll publish the legal advice as well?

DH: Well, it’s a long tradition that the legal advice that comes to government is not published and that’s the way that governments of –

AM: So no legal advice.

DH: - all different types have operated for a long time, but of course the government itself sees that legal advice and acts upon it.

AM: Okay, well let’s turn to the substance of the matter. In your view if we are to be inside a customs union in the transition period for some period of time, do we have to have an exit route from that? An ejector seat if you like on which only British hands pull the lever?

DH: Well I think you’re talking about the backstop.
AM: I am, yes.

DH: So you know the backstop is a backstop, so that’s – it’s not something that anybody wants. It’s not something we are trying to get –

AM: Brexit is Brexit, the backstop’s the backstop. It’s important.

DH: Well it has a certain ring to it but it’s not something that anybody is working towards. We don’t want to be in the backstop. By the way the European Union don’t want an open ended backstop either. It is there and has to be there because of the Irish situation and to respect the unique position of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, but it’s not something that’s an open ended thing. Actually within Article 50 there is no facility to make a permanent arrangement so it can only be temporary. Of course people want to confidence that it isn’t just going to go on and on and by the way that will be true of people in the European Union countries as well –

AM: But just so people watching can understand. In this backstop, which might very well happen we would be subject to EU rules and regulations without any kind of vote. And you say it couldn’t be permanent but it could go on for 10 or 20 years unless there is a way out. And my question to you is, what should the way out be? There is not going to be a date we gather by which time it ends, so what is the way out?

DH: So look, we have to come up with something. The Prime Minister has to negotiation something which is negotiable with the other side as well as working for people here.

AM: So it’s not simply a British ejector seat?
DH: So if you just have – if you have too hard a line about saying well we must just have a totally unilateral exit or there’s an absolutely fixed hard end date, that is not – very, very unlikely that is going to be negotiable with the other side. On the other hand, people here rightly want comfort and they should be able to have comfort and confidence that it isn’t an open ended thing. So there needs to be some sort of way of giving that –

AM: And this is the crunch problem at the moment?

DH: - of giving that comfort and confidence to people, but exactly what the shape of that is, that is partly – you know that is at the heart of these discussions, these negotiations that are going on with the European Union. We have to see what comes back.

AM: Has the government refused to give Aisha Bibi sanctuary? This is the Pakistani Christian woman who was going to be sentenced to death and has been released and she’s trying to get sanctuary somewhere in the west and it’s reported today that Britain has said no, because we’re not safe for blasphemying Pakistanis to live in.

DH: Well I can’t give you any new information on that, I’m afraid. I’m not close enough to the individual circumstances of the case.

AM: Well let’s turn to something you are close to which your own department. Do you think it was a tin eared of the Chancellor to say he was going to give little extras to education in English schools. Little extras?

DH: Well look, it’s a good thing because of the strength of the economy. There has been some extra money it’s been possible to find for the education system. Actually the £400 million which will go to small additional capital projects, that’s on top of £1.4 billion
in allocated capital, and actually there’s other money for other things in the wider education system as well and things like children’s social care and apprenticeships.

AM: Sure, very important, but when it comes to teachers and teaching assistants, the most important thing without schools are completely pointless –

DH: Absolutely, absolutely.

AM: - you cut the budgets by 8% and they’ve been frozen only this year. That is why head teachers and teachers and marching up and down Whitehall, that’s what they’re furious about. And a few little extra on whiteboards or the odd extra computer, as the Chancellor was talking about, feels to a lot of them like an insult.

DH: Well you’re quite right, that it is all about teachers. You can’t have great education system without great teachers and we have 10,000 more teachers than there were in 2010 and I think the most talented generation of teachers that we’ve ever had. Look, it is true that if you compare us to other countries we are relatively high spenders on state education and it is also true that we spend more than we used to, but I do also recognise that budgets are very tight. There have been particular cost pressures on schools and so I’m very conscious of that and we have to do what we can.

AM: You cut it last year. Why?

DH: Cut what, sorry?

AM: Cut spending on English schools last year.

DH: Well no. We found an additional £1.3 billion over two years to put into the schools budget to make sure we hold constant –
AM: Per capita per pupil –

DH: No.

AM: You did, I’m sorry.

DH: - to make sure we could hold constant the overall per pupil amounts.

AM: You cut pupil funding last year. You did cut per pupil funding last year.

DH: So we’re holding, we’re holding – over the two years we’re holding per pupil real terms funding constant.

AM: That’s this year. Last year you cut it.

DH: And – well – and it’s at a higher level, considerably higher level than it used to be. So you know, now the funding for the average class of 27 children in primary school is £132 thousand. That’s eight or ten thousand pounds more than it was a decade ago in real terms. There are pressures on school budgets, I’m not denying that for a moment and I take it very very seriously.

AM: A conversation to continue, but for now Damian Hinds thank you for very much for talking to us.

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