ANDREW MARR SHOW, 12TH FEBRUARY, 2017
DAVID LIDINGTON, MP, LEADER HoC

ANDREW MARR: Now these are dramatic times in Parliament, as I said, with convulsions over Brexit, Donald Trump and the future of the Commons speaker himself. I’m joined now by the leader of the House of Commons, David Lidington.

ANDREW MARR: Mr Lidington, did you personally feel any anxiety when you saw what John Bercow had said about his hostility to Brexit in public?

DAVID LIDINGTON: Well, as I understand it, I’ve seen the TV clip, this was in answer to a question he got at an open meeting in Reading University. I think had this been before the referendum that yes, I would have had concerns. I mean he said what he said, every Member of Parliament’s responsible for what they say. What I can say is look, I had more than six years as Europe minister under David Cameron and in that time I never found the Speaker was shy of calling lots of people who are critical of the EU to ask me difficult questions.

ANDREW MARR: So I mean if you go onto the website of the House of Commons and you go to the Speaker it says: “the Speakers are the chief officer and highest authority of the House of Commons and must remain politically impartial at all times.” And there’s a lot of MPs in your own party who feel he has breached that rule.

DAVID LIDINGTON: Yeah. There will be strong reaction amongst some MPs to what he said at Reading, particularly after what he said about the proposed State visit earlier in the week. Ultimately the Speaker has to command the confidence of the House of Commons as a whole. The Speaker has to have cross party authority.
ANDREW MARR: And these are still live issues which the Commons is going to be debating ad nauseam for the next 18 months. Alec Shelbrooke, one of your colleagues says: “John Bercow’s comments are in clear breach of the guidelines”, which I’ve just read, “laid down on the independence of the Speaker of the House,” and James Duddridge, another of your colleagues says: “Speaker Bercow cannot come back to the chair, having expressed views on Brexit. He is incapable of chairing parliament as the Speaker on any European business.” Do you agree with that or not?

DAVID LIDINGTON: Well that’s their opinion so it’s a matter for Members of the House. Yeah, but the government – what’s really important Andrew, is that the government doesn’t get involved in saying who the Speaker ought to be. The Speaker is the elected Chairman of the House of Commons as a whole. It’s really difficult but he’s not the creature of the government.

ANDREW MARR: Presumably he’s embarrassed the government and embarrassed you over the Trump visit. I assume you’ve had conversations about moving the Trump visit as a result of what’s happened in the House of Commons.

DAVID LIDINGTON: Well the Trump visit is still under discussion between the two governments. As with any State visit there’s a whole range of variables so the diaries of the key players on both sides, what makes up a good programme, when’s the right timing.

ANDREW MARR: Have you had any discussions about whether or not Donald Trump should address the two Chambers of Parliament?

DAVID LIDINGTON: Well the Speaker – and I talked obviously to the Prime Minister, I talk to the Speaker from time to time about
all sorts of things, but the arrangements for the State visits are conducted between Number 10 and Buckingham Palace arranging and the White House on behalf of the President and my understanding is those conversations are still ongoing. When it comes to whether any State visit of a President or anybody else should address Parliament I mean that doesn't happen with every State visit, nor is there a set venue. It's one of the options that's available.

ANDREW MARR: so what we know is that a lot of Tory MPs are livid with him about Trump and now about Brexit. My question is do you think he can survive the week ahead, do you think this is going to come to a vote of any kind? There's been a motion of No Confidence put down, will it be voted upon and what do you think will happen?

DAVID LIDINGTON: Well there's a motion being put down the day before we broke for the half term recess. It will be for all Members of Parliament individually cross party to decide how they respond to that motion.

ANDREW MARR: How would you vote?

DAVID LIDINGTON: I'm a member of the government. The government has made it very clear this is a matter for the House as a whole.

ANDREW MARR: It sounds to me as if you personally do have confidence in Speaker Bercow.

DAVID LIDINGTON: I've said the government is very determined this is a matter for the House as whole and it's really important for the very independence of the Speaker's office that the Speaker, whether they start as a Conservative MP, a Labour MP or whatever, is independent of government. Speakers, if anything,
should lean towards the people who are not in government, as actually John Bercow probably has done in the way he’s used urgent questions which we found inconvenient at times.

ANDREW MARR: And if this did come down to a vote on the floor of the House of Commons your instinct is that he might win?

DAVID LIDINGTON: Oh John has his very strong supporters, as well as his strong critics in the House of Commons, but you know, we shall have to see how Members as a whole respond.

ANDREW MARR: All right. Now there’s some strange things being said, apparently on behalf of the government about the House of Lords. If the House of Lords seeks to amend the Article 50 legislation, do you think it should be challenged or even abolished, or reformed, as some of your colleagues seem to think?

DAVID LIDINGTON: We’ve got a constitutional process and I think the fact that the exit bill has gone to the House of Lords, the Article 50 bill has gone to the House of Lords with a majority of more than 300 from the House of Commons and un-amended and frankly the amendments are all defeated by majorities in excess, well in excess of the government’s normal majority is a pretty powerful message to the Lords. Now they’ve got a proper constitutional duty to examine that. Of course they’re free to propose and debate amendments. I hope they will also take full account of the strength of opinion from the elected House.

ANDREW MARR: So it sounds to me this is a slightly coded - I wouldn’t go there if I was you. Something nasty might happen to you.

DAVID LIDINGTON: I’m not standing sort of round the back alley you know.
ANDREW MARR: With a cosh.

DAVID LIDINGTON: Waiting for a stray peer to arrive with a cosh in my hand, no. It’s this. That there is under our constitutional arrangements there’s always been acceptance. The Lords has a proper role as a scrutinising and reviewing chamber, but ultimately the Commons is the elected chamber – and behind the Commons on this occasion stands the vote of the referendum.

ANDREW MARR: One final question. We’ve heard from Opposition leaders that the fight is just about to start on the Brexit Bill. Over the next 18 months are there going to be moments in the Commons where there will be substantive and important votes on aspects of the negotiations as they go forward, or are we waiting for the vote right at the end of the process?

DAVID LIDINGTON: I think that would – it depends crucially on what kind of amendments are tabled and are found to be in order and debated and how people respond to those. We’ve got the Bill that will come in after the Queen’s Speech to repeal the European Communities Act and put EU legal obligations on the UK basis. We will also need a number of additional pieces of statute over the next couple of years to give the British authorities the power to do things that are at present done via the EU, like levy customs and excise duties.

ANDREW MARR: So there will be opportunities for votes probably?

DAVID LIDINGTON: There will be plenty of opportunities for votes. Obviously the precise nature of the issues to be determined in those votes depends on what the motions are, what the amendments are.

ANDREW MARR: You see I talk to people who’ve been over in Brussels and so forth looking at this from the other side and they
say for instance that they think we might well get a frictionless, relatively low tariff access to the single market. That might be doable. Might be deliverable but on the other hand the French and the Germans and others are absolutely determined to get their so called divorce settlements, the 40 to 60 billion Euros paid by the UK government and that will be the crucial issue. Now if there’s Tory MPs for instance who think that’s far too much and shouldn’t happen will they get a chance to make their voice heard?

DAVID LIDINGTON: Well there will be a vote on the final deal, the Prime Minister’s made that clear. I am sure that in the course of legislation, and frankly the various statements and questions we’ll have over the next few months there will be lots of opportunities to probe issues connected with negotiation. But the negotiations haven’t started yet. At the moment we’re seeing some initial positioning on the side of the 27. They haven’t even met formally to discuss their opening negotiating mandate, so we’ve got a long way ahead of us.

ANDREW MARR: David Lidington, a cosh comfortably inside your jacket pocket for now, thank you very much indeed.

ENDS