

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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JONATHAN ASHWORTH

AM: Jonathan Ashworth, thanks for bringing out a manifesto which we can look at. Let's look at what it says on the crucial issue. Here it is here.

'If we can't get agreement along the lines of our alternative plan, or a general election, Labour backs the option of a public vote.'

What does option mean?

JA: Well, we've shown our support on about three occasions now in the House of Commons, but of course it didn't have enough Conservative MPs supporting a public vote in the House of Commons so it failed in the Commons on the occasions where we've had those votes. We've always said – we said it in our 2017 general election manifesto, we've said it on subsequent occasions, and Jeremy Corbyn has been very clear that we respect, we accept the result of the referendum. After all, Labour MPs didn't obstruct the referendum legislation when it came through parliament in 2015.

AM: I'm sorry, I'm still confused. If I'm thinking about my lunch and I say I've got the options of sandwiches or soup or whatever it might be, that doesn't mean I'm going to have them. Option leaves something completely open. So what you're saying in this manifesto is you're saying we want our version of Brexit, option A or option one. We would love a general election, option two. And if we can't have those things we might have the possibility of the option of a further referendum but we're not committing ourselves to it. Actually when you read it closely this means we don't want another referendum.

JA: No, I don't think it does. I think, to take your lunch analogy, if you want soup, then that is what you're trying to get. That is what you can go for. But if you can't get soup you can get salad instead. Because what we are trying to do is saying, 'look, we

want the Brexit deal, we want a permanent customs union basis, something that secures rights for workers and environmental protections and a single market relationship. That is what we have been negotiating with the government – not getting very far, by the way, but that's the basis of our negotiations. If we can't get that and if it turns out that we're going to have a Tory deal that we don't believe is in the interest of the country, or indeed no deal, which is definitely not in the interest of the country we'll support – then we will support a referendum.

AM: You might or you might not.

JA: No, our position is to support a referendum.

AM: As an option.

JA: In those circumstances. But we've always said that we accept the result of the referendum. We've put forward our alternatives. We're trying to negotiate that with the government. As I say, it's not getting very far but we're still engaging in those negotiations in good faith.

AM: Let's move from options to priorities. Priority one is Brexit. Get us out on a Labour deal. That's your first priority. Priority two is a general election and priority three, further down the list, is the possibility of a referendum which might in due course, or not - you've heard Nigel Farage – lead to us staying inside the EU. It's way, way down.

JA: Well, it's not way, way down. We voted for it three times in the House of Commons. And the why reason we didn't get that referendum in the House of Commons when we voted for it is because there isn't enough support across the whole of the House of Commons for a referendum. Unless Conservative Members of Parliament come to a different judgement on a referendum we can't get one, because of the arithmetic of the House of Commons. Now, we have to deal with the reality of the MPs who have been returned to the House of Commons.

AM: But at the moment, as a party talking to the prime minister, you are trying to get Brexit happening?

JA: We're in negotiations with the prime minister. Not getting very far but we're doing our best. And we raised the issue of a confirmatory vote in those negotiations as well but the prime minister isn't prepared to compromise. We have been prepared to compromise and that's been demonstrated by the way we voted on the three different occasions in the House of Commons.

AM: In these elections there are, I think, four main pro-Brexit parties. There's UKIP, there's the Brexit Party, there's the Conservative Party, and there's the Labour Party. Those are all the four Brexit parties.

JA: No, no, no. That isn't the four Brexit parties.

AM: Let me read to you what Jo Swinson, the deputy leader of the Lib Dems said on this programme last week: 'to anyone watching this programme,' she says, 'who wants to stop Brexit be in no doubt, a vote for Labour is a vote for Brexit. Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson will use those votes to say the British people want Brexit to happen.'

JA: Well, I would say to Jo that, people watching this programme, be in no doubt, if you want to stop Nigel Farage's party – and you've just brilliantly demonstrated that Nigel Farage doesn't want to stand on his record because his record is one of wanting to privatise the NHS, is wanting big tax cuts for the very rich, and penalising working people in this county. If you want to stop Nigel Farage in these elections you have to vote Labour. The Liberal Party or the sort of Independent Change Party or whatever name they've got this week cannot stop the Brexit Party getting MEP in regions. It's a two-horse race between Labour and the Brexit Party.

AM: If I was a voter watching this interview and I'm thinking I disagree with Nigel Farage on the EU and I disagree with Nigel Farage on immigration, why would I vote Labour, who want to get

us out of the EU and who also wants to stop free movement of people? Why would I not vote for a proper remain party like the Liberal Democrats, like the Greens, like Plaid Cymru, like the SNP?

JA: Well, the Labour Party is the party that supported a referendum in the House of Commons three times now. The reason that that wasn't successful is because Conservative members didn't vote for it. Because that is the balance in the House of Commons, because no party has a majority in the House of Commons. That's why we're in such a mess, because, as you know, Theresa May called a general election and made a right hash of it.

AM: But isn't the truth of it that you've forgotten your Nye Bevan and you're wandering down the middle of the road. Nye Bevan famously said people who are in the middle of the road tend to get run over. And that's what's going to happen to you guys isn't it?

JA: Well, I don't think we will get run over. It looks to me, from today's opinion polls and through my campaigning – and I've been talking to people on the streets of Newcastle just yesterday, and on Friday, sorry – is that people are supporting of the Labour Party but they don't want Nigel Farage's party getting in, and this is a two-horse race now between the Labour Party and the Brexit Party. The Liberals or the Change Party are not going to stop Nigel Farage's party. Only the Labour Party – the left did better than the Liberal Party in the local elections – only the Labour Party can stop Nigel Farage.

AM: Let's turn to your responsibility, the NHS. There's reports in the papers this morning about huge cuts in NHS training, involving a massive, massive amount of money. Are you properly funded and would you reverse all of those training cuts?

JA: Yeah, I mean, this is really – because we expect in the coming days, perhaps as soon as Tuesday, that the government will finally bring forward its interim workforce plan on staffing. This is

– we've got 100,000 vacancies across the NHS and today is International Nurses Day. In fact we've lost 200,000 nurses since 2010 under the Tories. It's because they've had a pay freeze. It's because of the huge pressures on the front line. But it's also because they've cut the training budgets, the development budgets by around 200 million. We would reverse those cuts to training, because we want our staff who work in the NHS to be the best trained staff in the world. But at the moment we're losing so many staff from the NHS. We've got to reverse that.

AM: Let's bring those two things we've been talking about, the NHS and Brexit together. And I want to quote to you Jeremy Hunt. A long-serving Health Secretary, one of the longest-serving Health Secretaries in recent times, who's talking about a customs union at the heart of Labour's policy. And he says: 'a customs union would not work for the UK. I was Health Secretary. The EU would be able to decide that American companies could bid for NHS contracts without us, as the UK, having any say at all on an issue that's very emotive to lots of people in this country. So I don't think it's the right solution.' And on the facts he's right. If you do a customs deal which allows the EU to carry on in control, they can do T-Tech style deal with the US. We know that the American health companies are desperate to get into the British healthcare system, and you will be absolutely exposed to it.

JA: Well, no, because our version of the customs union is one where we would still have a say over the trade deals. And that is something that the Irish have said. It's perfectly sensible and would work. Actually what the government are proposing is the ability to write individual trade deals, which means they would write a trade deal with the US which would allow Trump's America, big private healthcare firms in the US, getting their hands on contracts in the UK. I don't want our NHS to be up for sale to US. So actually I think our proposal safeguards the NHS, it's actually the Tory proposal that puts it at risk.

AM: Jonathan Ashworth, you know that the Labour proposal for a customs union deal which gives the UK, outside the EU, a veto over EU trade deals runs counter to the very beginnings of the Treaty of Rome and is pretty close to being an impossible unicorn. If you don't get that you are completely exposed.

JA: No, but we have – Ireland, for example, have said this is a perfectly sensible proposal that the Labour Party is proposing. Others in the EU had something similar. So we would have an influence over those trade deals and we would be able to protect the NHS. It's actually the Tory proposal that puts the NHS at risk.

AM: If you don't get that sort seat at the table, how would you stop it?

JA: Well, we would. We would get that seat at the table. That's the point. We have got indications that we would be at the table under those circumstances.

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