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THE ANDREW MARR SHOW

INTERVIEW:

OWEN PATERSON

CONSERVATIVE

JUNE 14th 2015

ANDREW MARR:

Now then, the prime minister continues his European tour this week trying to win other EU leaders over to his plan to renegotiate Britain's relationship. It hasn't gone terribly well so far. Elements of the deal he's seeking are beginning to emerge, however. How will it be received, however, by the voters and by his own party? I should say that we asked the government for an interview with a minister on this or any other subject, but we were told none was available. But we do have the leading light in the Conservatives for Britain group I was talking about earlier on, the former cabinet minister Owen Paterson. Welcome Mr Paterson.

OWEN PATERSON:

Good morning.

ANDREW MARR:

Now this is going to be an important week for Britain and for Europe of course in the House of Commons because you have the chance to debate and possibly amend the government's legislation. There's been a lot of talk about something called 'purdah', which I think a lot of people won't understand. Can you explain why purdah matters in this debate – what purdah is and why it matters?

OWEN PATERSON:

Yeah, Andrew, purdah is crucial. Purdah means the government cannot use agencies of the state to spend money or to send information to citizens in a period leading up to an election. And this has been well established. We had long debates in the last parliament - very senior figures like Jack Straw, John MacGregor on our side – and we came up with a compromise of 28 days that government agencies cannot spend money and cannot use ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) So government as a machine ...

OWEN PATERSON:

(over) Exactly.

ANDREW MARR:

... stands back for 28 days?

OWEN PATERSON:

Yeah. And I think that is absolutely fundamental. It is unacceptable that there'll be no limit to local government, national government, or above all European government agencies spending money and sending information to citizens. And that is going to skew the whole thing. And the British people have a very, very strong sense of fairness. They will detect that this has been rigged and if ... And what worries me – and this is an absolutely really, really heartfelt plea to the government – it really worries me if this is seen to be rigged, if the British people don't sense it's fair, whatever the result it won't be seen to be legitimate and this whole issue will fester further. What we need to do, we need to go back very clearly to the current rules on purdah, which we accepted as a compromise – 28 days we thought was not enough – we should go back to that. And the idea that government ministers can't function is nonsense. If you look at the rules at the last General Election ...

ANDREW MARR:

Yeah, okay.

OWEN PATERSON:

... you can go in a government car to look at a factory. You can't go there and announce a great splurge of money.

ANDREW MARR:

So this is essentially about fairness because you've got the purdah issue you've just described so eloquently, you've got the possibility of the EU being able to spend large amounts of money to back the Yes vote, you have a lot of big business coming behind the Yes vote, and you are facing a referendum on a very tilted playing field is your fundamental worry?

OWEN PATERSON:

Absolutely correct. The EU has a massive strategic and selfish interest in the UK staying in the EU. They get 10 billion net from us. We're the second biggest contributor. We have big business constantly through your medium on the business programmes, on the business pages trumpeting they want to stay in because this is an organisation which suits the big fat cats.

ANDREW MARR:

Yeah.

OWEN PATERSON:

And what I feel very strongly is that the British people out there running the small businesses, clobbered by all this regulation, they want to have a say, but if the whole thing is skewed from the beginning right up to polling day it won't be seen to be fair.

ANDREW MARR:

It's the pikemen against the cavalry. Why do you think the prime minister's prepared to allow this to happen?

OWEN PATERSON:

I really don't understand because I think what is very bad is that this was brought in by the last Labour government, and I really do expect the Labour Party to go along with their own legislation; and we in opposition, led by highly respected figures like

Dominic Grieve and the Speaker John Bercow actually, we argued for a lengthier period of purdah, so there's a longer period for the people to wake up to an issue. Most people aren't into politics. They don't want to hear all this banging on about Europe, but they will need to know the facts and details. If this whole issue is swamped right up to polling day, it will not be a fair poll. So I really would ask the government very simply just to withdraw this whole thing and go back to the 28 days and that is simple.

ANDREW MARR:

If they don't withdraw it, will you try and vote them down and would you have the votes to do that?

OWEN PATERSON:

Well we have put amendments down and obviously it depends on the other parties. I mean will the Labour Party stand by their own legislation, which we accepted as a compromise?

ANDREW MARR:

If they did, you could defeat the government on this?

OWEN PATERSON:

Well I don't want to. I'd very much prefer the government - and we're all so pleased we've got this bill, we're so pleased we got a majority, at last the British people are going to have a say ... We really don't want an argument about this. And it's totally homemade, this. We don't have to have it. The government could withdraw this issue and we could push on and re-establish the rules of purdah.

ANDREW MARR:

So your message is listen very intently and change course before worse things happen really?

OWEN PATERSON:

Please. We do not need a row about this.

ANDREW MARR:

Okay.

OWEN PATERSON:

Just redu... go back to the existing arrangements, which worked perfectly well in the General Election - I said – factories ran, ministers carried on their roles. They acted as ministers. When they were being political, they acted politically. And that's all we're asking.

ANDREW MARR:

If there is an unfair referendum and it's narrowly lost by the No campaign, what happens to the Conservative family?

OWEN PATERSON:

Well I don't like answering hypothetical questions. I hope we do have a very fair referendum and we have a proper choice put to the people.

ANDREW MARR:

But that's at the heart of what you're worried about at the moment really, isn't it?

OWEN PATERSON:

Well yes, but no I'm generally worried about the British people who ... You know out on the streets, there is - during the election - a lot of people are unhappy about the current arrangements. The current position with the EU is untenable. The EU is going to leave us, the Eurozone, to fix the horrors of the euro, to save Greece, etcetera. It's going to have become effectively a new country. So we have a wonderful opportunity to go back to...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) choice?

OWEN PATERSON:

... or to leap forwards actually to a market arrangement. All this stuff that the EU is synonymous with market is nonsense. We could have a market arrangement, a trading

arrangement, cooperation, get our role back on the international bodies that really decide regulation, and that would be very satisfactory I think to millions of people.

ANDREW MARR:

It sounds to me as if there is nothing that David Cameron could win in this negotiation and come back, which would persuade you that we should stay inside the EU today?

OWEN PATERSON:

No I think the current arrangements are highly unsatisfactory. We haven't got the best of the market - I mean in his Bloomberg speech, he said we haven't really opened up services - and I'm very clear we do not make our own laws in our own parliament. The points are very simple. We want to have a trading relationship. We want to get back our key role on those world bodies.

ANDREW MARR:

Alright.

OWEN PATERSON:

I mean if you were given a choice, would you choose a Swedish psychiatric nurse ...

ANDREW MARR:

No! (*laughs*)

OWEN PATERSON:

... with a career in social teaching at Gothenburg University to be our trade commissioner? No. We want a proper Brit representing the fifth largest trading nation in the world on the WTO. That's what we're looking for.

ANDREW MARR:

So David Cameron is nonetheless engaged in a really, really difficult negotiation with his partners at the moment. Lord Heseltine has just said in the most urbane and polite way that people like you should pipe down for a while and let him get on with it. (*Paterson laughs*) If he comes back having won for instance the right to remove tax

credits from foreign workers coming over here for four years, that would be a major victory, wouldn't it?

OWEN PATERSON:

Yes and I'm absolutely delighted that Lord Heseltine wants to join our club. It's brilliant. *(Marr laughs)* We'll add him up. Steve Baker will probably be watching and put another tick on the peers list.

ANDREW MARR:

Sounds unlikely, but ...

OWEN PATERSON:

We've been very careful. I totally with Michael we do not want a rancorous row about this. We want a serious debate because this is a real discussion as to whether this organisation we're part of is a market relationship or whether it is effectively a political entity. I didn't like the tones that the ancient English kingdom is going to get subsumed because that's where this thing is heading and we know it was always a political project. So there is this division. But I've been very careful not to give a list of things to the prime minister. He started this process ... He only got going ten days ago. He's been very canny, I think, not outlining the detail and we should back him. So it's quite clear we give him time to get a deal ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) Okay I absolutely ...

OWEN PATERSON:

(over) ...but we do prepare in case the deal is not satisfactory.

ANDREW MARR:

I absolutely promise that I'm not going to go through a long list. However, however the issue of a parliamentary red card is raised again and again. How important to you is, as it were, the absolute sovereignty of the British Parliament in this negotiation?

OWEN PATERSON:

Well I think it is absolutely vital. I mean I find ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) Because that's not something, as we heard from Philip Hammond last week, that can be negotiated.

OWEN PATERSON:

No you've got all these eager beaver new MPs thrilled to bits to be elected to parliament and they're told they don't count because decisions will be made by an outside body. You know we are the fifth largest economy in the world. We can make our own decisions. We can cooperate with the Anglosphere, we can cooperate with the Commonwealth as an independent nation and have the very best cooperation with our trading neighbours. So I do think parliamentary sovereignty, making our own rules in our own parliament and kicking out the rascals if we make bad laws is absolutely fundamental.

ANDREW MARR:

So we're not going to get those things from this negotiation, so this renegotiation is not going to alter our relationship with the rest of the EU fundamentally enough to persuade many Conservatives that it's time ... that it's right to stay in the EU rather than leave it?

OWEN PATERSON:

No give the prime minister a chance. He said he wanted fundamental change in our relationship. He's also been ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) So what would fundamental change be from your point of view?

OWEN PATERSON:

Well I want to go to trade and cooperation and I want to get away from political and judicial arrangements. I mean every day I was doing DEFRA, I was making a judgement as to how far I could push commission law without being fined. The first day I got in, I found we were being fined £600 million sterling because of the mess the last Labour government made of CAP introduction. Now that is going on the

whole time. You don't need to have that sort of interference to your own country to trade with people.

ANDREW MARR:

You see Philip Hammond told me last week, sitting in that very chair as it happens, that any attempt to give the House of Commons sovereignty in these arrangements is completely impossible to negotiate because it would be the end of the EU as it is, so that's off the agenda entirely. If that's off the agenda entirely, there is nothing, I put to you again, the prime minister can negotiate that is going to satisfy you.

OWEN PATERSON:

But that was always the intention going right back to the *(inaudible)*

ANDREW MARR:

(over) To satisfy you?

OWEN PATERSON:

...They wanted to overrule the democratic states. And that's why I say they are effectively leaving us to fix the euro. They have to create this new entity, a new nation where you can shift money from Germany to Greece, etcetera. We have an opportunity to have a totally new relationship. This is what I interpret the prime minister's terms "fundamental change". We want to have a trading and cooperational relationship without this endless nonsense about the EU being synonymous with the market. It's not. And then also we want to make our own laws in our own parliament and we can negotiate that if we really try. So this group is really beefing up the prime minister's negotiations. You know stuck on the hill, eating his *(inaudible)*

ANDREW MARR:

(over) Up to a point, up to a point.

OWEN PATERSON:

(over) ... with Angela Merkel. They will have had an impact. They have to wake up to the fact that ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) It's a big group. You've got 110 MPs.

OWEN PATERSON:

Yeah and we got a majority in parliament and we've got a prime minister committed to a process.

ANDREW MARR

(over) And do you have council ministers in your group?

OWEN PATERSON:

We'll not get into names.

ANDREW MARR:

I know. I'm not asking for names. I'm just asking do you have cabinet ministers in your group?

OWEN PATERSON:

(over) There's a whole variety of people. There's people right across, but we've agreed not to mention names.

ANDREW MARR:

I know. I'm not asking for names, but do they include cabinet ministers?

OWEN PATERSON:

There will be support, but we're not ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) There'll be support from the cabinet?

OWEN PATERSON:

Yeah.

ANDREW MARR:

Yeah.

OWEN PATERSON:

But we're not ... We've said we won't give names. But this really does strengthen the prime minister's hand. He goes there now with a majority, which our European neighbours didn't expect; he goes there with a bill in parliament which is going through now; and here's this group pushing for really fundamental change. That's what we're saying.

ANDREW MARR:

Alright, okay.

OWEN PATERSON:

We're saying the current arrangements are not acceptable. We want something which is really fundamentally different.

ANDREW MARR:

Do you think that if ministers are not allowed to speak openly to voice their own conscientiously held opinions about Europe inside the government, they will be forced to resign? And what would that do to the Conservative family?

OWEN PATERSON:

Well, as I understand it ... I mean it's for them to decide, but as I understand it we let the negotiations run; and then if there are ministers who don't like the final settlement, they can leave the government and campaign for a no. I mean I think ...

ANDREW MARR:

You feel they would have to leave the government first?

OWEN PATERSON:

Well I think it would be better if they stayed within the government, but it's really up to them and their conscience. It would be better ... I think it would be better if there was a free choice.

ANDREW MARR:

Very briefly, one other big issue this morning in the papers – we were talking about it all day – is Isis and the perception by a lot of our chiefs of defence or former chiefs of defence staff as reported in The Telegraph that we have become an enfeebled country disarming far too fast in front of a really serious new threat.

OWEN PATERSON:

Yes I read that with real care. I mean I gave a speech in Washington just before the election pointing out that at the time of the Falklands we were spending 5 per cent of GDP. And I don't get hung up about these particular percentages, but the point I made is that should world circumstances change – and we've taken a massive peace dividend since we got rid of the Soviet Union – sadly we have to rearm. Now we have corrected the awful 38 billion mess behind the defence budget. We are building aircraft carriers and new kit. What I said in Washington, sadly we have to have a proper review, which is what I think these senior defence figures are asking for, which looks at what is the kit requirement. Is it aircraft carriers, is it new cyber for GCHQ? And frankly I think there'll be people like me who will say it's not the 2 per cent we've got to hang up; it's making sure we have the right equipment required to defend this country under the new circumstances which are sadly deteriorating the world.

ANDREW MARR:

But that means more money, so would you like George Osborne to rethink the £500 million cut for instance already announced in the defence budget halfway through the year?

OWEN PATERSON:

I think it would be better to do what the defence chiefs have suggested, which is to have a real review, to make an analysis of Britain's position in the world and see what kit we need; and then under the very difficult constraints where we're still borrowing £200,000 a minute, see where that money comes from.

ANDREW MARR:

Owen Paterson, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

INTERVIEW ENDS