ANDREW MARR SHOW
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EMILY THORNBERRY

AM: I must ask you about the Saudi issue because you’ve got a big piece in today’s papers about Kashoggi and all that. First of all, do you think the Saudis did it?

ET: I think the balance of evidence is that they did. I think that they’ve had eleven days, eleven days to explain, but they haven’t come up with any decent explanation at all. We have all of this evidence from the Apple Watch and various other recordings, which do point the finger at it. I think on the balance of probabilities they did. And I think that what’s so interesting and so sad is that we have that – do you remember the journalist in Ukraine who did this –

AM: Very well. Turned up again.

ET: Exactly. And it took a matter of hours before Boris Johnson condemned the Russians for murdering him. And yet we have had nothing but pusillanimous mutterings from Jeremy Hunt in relation so this.

AM: There was a tweet from Jeremy Hunt wasn’t there.

ET: Yes. Saying, ‘oh, we’re going to look into this and if there’s anything in it then obviously it’s serious.’ He’s being outdone by Donald Trump – whoever would have thought that? That they’d catch up with Donald Trump when it comes to condemnation of this and actually taking action and being prepared to stand firm.

AM: So there’s a sudden general election, Labour win it, Emily Thornberry is Foreign Secretary. What would you be doing now?
ET: What we have said for a number of years now is that we would no longer be selling arms to Saudi Arabia because of what they've been doing in Yemen. They are responsible for air attacks on the civilian population in Yemen, and that's wrong. And it is on the face of it in breach of international humanitarian law. And we have said that we would stop selling arms to the Saudis.

AM: Now we've had the Kashoggi case and we've had all the beheadings that you're written about as well, and so on. Would it be a more general change in policy to Saudi Arabia? Would you stop doing business with the Saudis? Would you start to expel their diplomats? Diplomats were expelled after the Skripal killings to Russia, would you do the same to Saudi Arabia?

ET: We would stop selling arms to Saudi Arabia in current circumstances until they changed their ways. And frankly, we need to be able to stand up to the Crown Prince and we need to make it perfectly clear. Instead of inviting him over and rolling out the red carpet and fawning all over him we would be making it clear that we disagreed.

AM: When we rolled out the red carpet we also did a 16-billion-pound trade agreement with them. Would most of that then be threatened if the Labour Party came to power?

ET: I think that we have had – I mean, I think our country’s had enough of us (sic). I think that we have to stand up to them and we have to say this current behaviour is unacceptable. The beheadings. You know, it’s all very well you giving women the right to drive cars in Saudi Arabia, but all of the women who have been campaigning for it, it seems are in jail. This is not right. This continual behaviour in relation to human rights is unacceptable and it really is about time that we said so.
EMILY THORNBER

AM: But saying so means losing British jobs. When you discussed this in the House of Commons one of your MPs from the West Midlands, John Spellar said to you, ‘on shutting off plane sales to Saudi Arabia, is she’ – that’s you – ‘prepared to go to the north-west and say to workers there, their wives and their families, that we should shut their factories and destroy their communities? Because that is the logical consequence of what she proposes?’

ET: I have spoken to a lot of people who work in this industry, both on the shop floor and in management, and I have said to them we all agree, don’t we, that whilst we don’t want to get in the way of the arms industry, we do not want to do things that are contrary to law. And it is the law that you should not sell arms to a country that is using it to kill civilians in other countries or to be involved in internal oppression in your own country. And that, on the face of it, is what the Saudis are doing in Yemen, and for that reason we have to stop arms sales to Saudi.

AM: Whatever the cost on jobs?

ET: No, because there are plenty of other countries that we can be selling arms to and the arms industry has had full notice of this, it has been our policy for at least two-three years that this is what we will do. And I’m afraid this alleged murder is yet more evidence of the way in which the Saudi Prince in particular seems to be out of control. Do you remember when they kidnapped the Prime Minister of Lebanon? When they asked the Prime Minister of Lebanon to come over for a hunting trip and then beat him up and put him on television and told him he had to resign? I mean, this is the behaviour –

AM: Some people would say you are much less keen as a party to denounce Russia after the Skripal killings. Why? Is this because the politics is more convenient for you?
ET: I was quite clear about that, and again said exactly the same thing, that on the balance of evidence it seems as though the Russians were responsible. And that is the balance of evidence now. And that is what we have to do, we have to follow the evidence in relation to this.

AM: .. in this case too.

ET: Well, we have to respond to what it is that happens. It seems to me stopping selling arms to Saudi Arabia is a pretty strong sign, and being outspoken in the way that I am, I think it’s a pretty strong sign of what it is that Britain is prepared to put up and what Britain is not prepared to put up.

AM: Let’s turn to Brexit. It seems quite likely – we don’t know yet – it seems pretty likely that the Prime Minister is going to come back to the House of Commons with a deal which would involve staying inside the customs union for some considerable time, until we resolve the Irish border problem. Would Labour back that?

ET: I think that what we’re being given is we’re being given – I think they’re going to come along and give us a sort of ridiculous binary test – choice – which is not – I mean, I think –

AM: Which is the test you’ll have. It’s a choice.

ET: No, no, no, no. Absolutely not. We said that we wanted to have a meaningful vote and we cannot see why we should have, on the one hand, the Theresa May nonsense and on the other hand no deal, because that’s what they’re threatening us with. We said a meaningful vote, we want to have a meaningful vote, and frankly, if she comes back with something which is just a fudge that she’s cooked up with Brussels and it doesn’t meet our test we’re not going to vote for it. The British people are not stupid, we’re not stupid, we’re not voting for something which is
essentially a bridge to nowhere. We need to know what our future relationship with Europe is going to be, and a fudge won’t fix it.

AM: But it would suit Labour to stay inside the customs union, at least for a while, and it suits Labour to get a proper answer to the Irish backstop problem, and she’s doing both of those things. Isn’t it just playing party politics to say you’ll vote it down anyway?

ET: What suits the country is that we should not be having a deal whereby Brussels and Theresa May, if they do come to an agreement that Theresa May’s able to get through the Cabinet, comes to an agreement which essentially says we haven’t been able to agree anything for the last two years but we’re going to be able to agree something in the next two years. I mean, it’s clearly nonsense. Yes, what we need to do is we need to be perfectly clear that we have to remain in a customs union which includes services, and then on top of that we need to be able to negotiate a free trade deal with them which means that we can start talking about what the rules and regulations are that will be applicable, and then that way we can start negotiating on things like emigration and the other elements which are important. And that certainty is what is needed for Britain now, and that is not what we’re being offered.

AM: And to be crystal clear, if Theresa May brings back this kind of deal and MPs are told it’s this or the chaos of no deal, Labour MPs will still vote against her?

ET: That is a false choice. You’ve swallowed Number Ten propaganda on this.

AM: That is what will be in front of MPs when this comes back. That’ll be the choice that they’re given. I’m not giving them the choice.
ET: No, no. I appreciate that. The government are playing chicken on this and are saying we will offer you this and it will be nonsense and you have to agree with it because otherwise there’s no deal. We say no and we say get on and do your job properly. You’ve been faffing around for two years. Agree something which actually means something so that the British public and British business have some idea of where we’re going.

AM: You’ve mentioned your tests a couple of times. They’re a bit silly aren’t they?

ET: No, they’re not. They’re absolutely not. And do you know what? They are the very words that the Tory Ministers said, that’s what they said they would achieve, and when we said we put forward this –

AM:... during a speech from the Ex-Brexit Secretary. Unscripted offhand comment, the exact same benefits two years ago.

ET: Okay, so when she said that she was going to go off and get this deal and we said we will have six tests and she said – Theresa May said, ‘oh it’s fine, I’m going to able to agree all that, my agreement will meet your tests,’ that’s what the Prime Minister said and we’re holding her to it.

AM: I’m not denying there was blind optimism earlier on, I’m just saying if you say we must have the exact same benefits, then that means that we have to stay inside the single market and the customs union, otherwise we can’t possible have the exact same benefits. So it does seem to a lot of people that these are tests designed for the government to fail them. I mean, they’re intended to provoke a parliamentary crisis because you want a general election as soon as possible.
ET: Those tests are designed with the British public in mind. They are tests which will look after our country. And frankly, that’s what the Labour Party has been doing, where the Tory party have just been involved in some psychodrama for the last two years where they have just been fighting amongst themselves, not able to agree on what it is that they want to negotiate, so since they can’t agree on what they’re able to negotiate, guess what, they haven’t been able to negotiate anything.

AM: Alright, confession time. I can’t always remember what your six tests are but I’ve got them written down here. Does it ensure a strong and collaborative future with the EU? How can the government possibly prove that one way or the other? Or anyone?

ET: Well, I think that what it has to be is it has to be an agreement whereby we’re able to continue speaking to them, we’re able to things like work together on Euro Atom, for example. That’s kind of important. What about the agencies that oversee medical provisions? You know, we need to be able to continue to work closely with them. And at the moment they’re just discarding these things saying, ‘oh it’ll be fine, I’m sure we can sort something out.’ No. We’re not agreeing to a blind Brexit, we are not agreeing to building half a bridge and we don’t even know where it’s going to.

AM: And if Theresa May is relying on the Labour Party to save her bacon in this forthcoming vote she can think again.

ET: NO, Theresa May must come back with a deal, as we have been saying for the last two years entirely consistently, that you have to come back with a deal that will pass our six tests. If it does, then fine, we will vote for it, but if it doesn’t meet our tests we will not. Because what we need as a country is a bit of surety. We need to know, a bit of certainty, where it is that we’re going
and at the moment, the way things stand at the moment, it is completely unclear.

AM: Are you going to replace universal credits entirely as a party?

ET: We need to have a root and branch reform of universal credit. I was on the committee – I was the person in charge of the committee when universal credit was being brought in – and we warned them – I know because it’s my words – we warned them about all the problems there were going to be.

AM: John McDonnell announces it has to go. No ifs, no buts, the thing has to go.

ET: We have to have a fundamental reform of it. I mean, this is - the principle of having a simpler benefit is fine. But you know, as I say, when my mother was made destitute, when she had three children and the idea that she had to go onto benefits and the third child would not be provided for because she had been so reckless as to have a third child without thinking that her partner might walk out on her, it ’s really wrong. It’s wrong.

AM: So what Labour does is absolutely crucial now. Gordon Brown helpfully said there were three things that you could do as a party. You could try and reform universal credit. It sounds to me like that’s not radical enough for you. You could go back to the original system, which is difficult because you go back to lots and lots of separate benefits. It’s a difficult thing to do, but you could do that. Or thirdly, you could come up with an entirely different system of your own. Which of those three is it?

ET: I’m not sitting here today and telling you, but what I was going to say is that there has to be – there are things that are fundamentally wrong with universal credit. The principle is one that we don’t have a problem with, but it has always been how it
works. And some of the things that are wrong with it are so fundamental. You know, half of single parents will lose £200 a month. It’s appalling. And you know what happened? You know what happened is that George Osborne was against the idea of universal credit. He was completely against it and he had problems with it. An IDS had problems with it. And then Osborne realised that this was a vehicle for cuts. Because the process is so complex he could introduce a whole lot of cuts and nobody would notice. Well, they are noticing it and we said that they would notice. You can’t take away –

AM: I understand that it’s not in your interest, as it were, to help the government out on this. But Tory Ministers are now also saying they need an extra two billion pounds to ensure the transitional arrangements at least don’t leave so many people so badly off. Would Labour support a big extra amount of money going into this system now to tide people over?

ET: I think that we have to make sure that the cuts, which is what this vehicle is for, have to be – we have to look at that. It’s not fair – she says, austerity is over and that we’ve all worked so hard. We must not come out of austerity on the backs of the poor. I mean, this is wrong. It’s fundamentally wrong.

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