MATT HANCOCK, MP
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AM: Can I start with a question which is not from me. It’s from somebody you probably know who he is, a gentleman from Belfast. And he wants to know whether there will be a time limit to the - he’s on the screen now. It’s a Mr Nigel Dodds from Belfast. So will we get the date it ends? That’s about of course the time limit after which we leave this customs arrangement we’re going to be stuck in. Is there going to be a time limit?

MH: Well, I certainly hope so. I’m expecting that the transitional arrangements they’ve got to be temporary and time limited. I voted Remain in the referendum, but it’s very important that we recognise and implement the results of the referendum and we’re going into the final few days and weeks of these negotiations and I think that it’s important that where we have a backstop that that both reflects the integrity of the UK, with respect to the customs union and customs arrangements and also that it’s temporary.

AM: To be absolutely crystal clear, we’re in this is kind of customs limbo for the time being. There will be a date. When MPs get to vote on that they will see a date by which time we will have left the customs union.

MH: Well the proposal is that it will be temporary.
AM: No, but that’s slightly different. Temporary can go on forever. Temporary can go on for 10 or 20 years. Will there be a date is my question?

MH: Well, there’s different ways to ensure that something is time limited.
AM: Not really.
MH: There are, there are different ways of doing that.

AM: Give me another way then.

MH: Well for instance you can set conditions under which the point at which the arrangements come to an end. But the crucial thing, big picture is this. We’re coming into the final days and weeks of these negotiations, the Prime Minister is negotiating on behalf of the country in the national interest. She is determined to make sure that we honour the results of the referendum, that we get the control of our laws and that we have as frictionless trade as possible, ‘cause that’s very important for the economy, and everybody needs to get behind the Prime Minister and pull behind her because she is trying to deliver the best deal for Britain. And that’s the best way to take this forward.

AM: As you know a lot of your Cabinet colleges need to see an actual date there and you’re suggesting they won’t. You certainly can’t tell me that they will.

MH: Look, I’m the Health Secretary right and I’m in the Cabinet and care about getting the Brexit deal right, but I also spend most of my time, as you would hope, making sure that the NHS is running as well as possible.

AM: And we’ll come onto that, I promise.

MH: But the crucial point through this Brexit negotiation we’ve had an awful lot of noise all the way through and I think the best approach is to concentrate on making sure that as a nation we can get the best deal and as I say, the Prime Minister is absolutely rock solid behind getting that deal, including ensuring that the backstop arrangements are temporary.

AM: Another big picture question. In this customs arrangement we’re apparently going to be in for some time will there be a break moment at which point we can say to Brussels, we are leaving
without your permission, with our without your permission, we are off. Will that be in the deal?

MH: Well you’ll have to ask those who are in the room negotiating the deal. But as I said there’s lots –

AM: There has to be there though.
MH: - there’s different ways that you can make sure that something is credibly time limited. And that’s what I want to see.

AM: Do you think that by the end of this week that’s just beginning you’ll be the same Cabinet that there is now?

MH: Well I certainly hope so. I mean there’s absolutely no reason why not because –

AM: You hope many things this morning. A man of optimism.
MH: Yeah, well last time there was the Cabinet reshuffle, when I was asked to be the Health Secretary I didn’t expect that one to happen because I thought that everybody would come behind the deal that the PM put on the table at Chequers because it manages to get us to reflect the result of the referendum, to deliver on that and crucially to make sure that we have as frictionless trade as possible with the EU which is so important for our economy.

AM: Lots of your MPs at the moment are trying to work out what to do in this situation. Do you think it is possible that out of this unholy mess, not created by the Prime Minister entirely, you know there’s lots of people involved in this. Out of this situation we’re going to have a General Election before Christmas?

MH: No.
AM: Absolutely not, not going to happen?
MH: I can see absolutely no circumstances in which that will happen.
AM: So we’re going to see Tory MPs really worried about the nature of the backstop agreement. Can I ask you something else.
MH: Hold on. We haven’t come to the conclusion of the negotiations.
AM: This is .. way now isn’t it?
MH: The negotiations on the withdrawal agreement are going on as we speak and then we’re going to have Cabinet on Tuesday to discuss the progress. Of course all negotiations with the EU tend to end up coming to a crunch at the last minute, we know that.
AM: They always do, yes.
MH: And so the negotiations are still ongoing and that’s then the moment, once a deal has been struck, that the Prime Minister will be able to bring it back to parliament and explain the benefits of the deal and why it’s going to both honour the result of the referendum and make sure that we have high quality frictionless trade with the EU. If you stick on the – if you ask the big picture question what are we trying to achieve here, it’s making sure that we deliver on Brexit and we deliver on a way that supports the future prosperity of this nation, and I’m confident that we can get that.

AM: So exactly on that big picture question let me read you something Michel Barnier said this week. He said: ‘The details of the future relationship will only be negotiated after the UK’s withdrawal.’ Is that true?

MH: Well what we will settle, alongside a withdrawal agreement is then the political declaration on the future partnership. That’s about the big picture questions about what it’s going to look like. The shape of it.

AM: Very important. Will that be legally binding?
MH: Well that all depends on what happens in the final stages of these negotiations.
AM: It won't. It's not going to be legally binding. So you're going to give MPs what has been called a 'blind Brexit.' Sign up here, stay inside the customs union for a while, carry on paying and you will get something, we know not what it will be, we don't have the details, but something will happen in due course.

MH: No, it's always been the plan to ensure that we then have a political declaration which both sides sign up to on what the future relationship is going to look like and there's progress being made on that as well.

AM: Okay, let's turn to another issue which is also Brexit connected. How many vacancies for care workers do you face at the moment?

MH: Well there are some vacancies for care workers.
AM: 76,000. Nearly 100,000 in fact.
MH: Well it depends how you measure it because we've also got to make sure that we have more –
AM: You would agree a lot?
MH: have more nurses. So making sure that we can get people from around the world is important, but so too is training people domestically to go into these jobs, and making sure that we harness new technology so that the jobs can be as effective and fulfilling as possible.

AM: Sure, but there's an awful lot of people paid relatively small amounts of money working the care sector in this country and as you point out in hospitals in well. The Agriculture section has got a special deal with the EU, or is trying to get a special deal whereby they have an agreement to bring in lots of people to work in the fields. Should there be the same kind of deal to get people working in the care sector?
MH: Well, there are discussions underway about whether that should happen. But if you think about it, in the care sector, as well as amongst NHS workers there are more people currently in the UK from outside the EU than from the rest of the EU. So we've always attracted people from right across the world. This is not just an EU question. And the approach that we should take in the future is to be open to the brightest and the best from around the world. So I want to see more of that. You know we're just about to put £20 billion extra into the NHS.

AM: So lots of special visas to let people come in and work in the care sector and in the NHS, as with the agricultural sector?

MH: I want to both expand the domestic training, so more people in the UK have the chance to work in the care sector and in the NHS, and yes, looking across the world.

AM: Are people going to be worse off as a result of the Universal Credit changes?

MH: No. There is transitional protections in place to ensure that when people are migrated onto the new benefit –

AM: But Esther McVey who is in charge of this in the Cabinet said people would be worse off. Some people would be worse off.

MH: Well look, I've looked at the detail of this and when people are migrated onto the new benefit we put in place a £3 billion package to ensure that people aren't worse off. And I also know about Universal Credit from seeing it implemented locally, because my area's one of the first to implement it. And the result there is that the majority of people prefer being on Universal Credit and the reason is that then they can go and get a job and if they lose that job, which often people who are on Universal Credit are very
worried about, then the credit comes back automatically. It’s one of the reasons that we’ve got record employment in this country, and of course all the way through its implementation we’ve made amendments. And that’s perfectly reasonable. In fact it’s been a very good way of rolling out a policy where you then make an amendment if you come across a problem.

AM: The Resolution Foundation, who also have studied this in great detail say that if you’re a working single parent with two children on low pay, you’re going to be about £3,000 worse off a year. That’s a lot of money for these people. A lot of money. And the transitional arrangements are time limited and if your circumstances change you lose the transitional help.

MH: Well of course. If people’s circumstances change then it’s right that the level of their benefit should change because that’s the nature of benefits is they reflect a particular circumstance. But the transitional arrangements are there to make sure that when people are migrated over then there is – then they don’t lose out. That’s the purpose of it. But there’s a bigger picture point again on Universal Credit –

AM: John Major thinks you’re walking towards another Poll Tax disaster, that this is a really, really big government mistake that you are walking straight towards. And lots of your colleagues want an extra £2 billion to ensure that those transitional payments are generous enough so up and down the country the most vulnerable, the poorest people are not made worse off.

MH: I like John Major very much, but I disagree with him on this and because I’ve seen the Universal Credit in operation in my own constituency where I’ve had no letters on it at all, whereas you normally get a pretty good feel for how much of a problem there is, and also I’ve sat there with the work coaches meeting people who are on Universal Credit and seeing how the way that it works means that people can be helped into work much more and much
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more easily because of the nature and the frictionless nature of Universal Credit when people need to go back onto it.

AM: We’re running out of time. I have to ask you very quickly. You heard about the Khashoggi crisis Emily Thornberry was talking about. If it’s proved that the Saudis did what we think they did in that Istanbul Embassy, should we be revising our trade deals with the Saudis, should we be expelling Saudi diplomats, what should we be doing?

MH: Well, we don’t know the full details yet but if the allegations are true there will be serious consequences. And that’s what the Foreign Secretary has said. He’s spoken to his Saudi opposite number and he’s made that clear.

Ends