ANDREW MARR SHOW
15th JANUARY 2017
JAMES BROKENSHIRE

AM: Let’s go through this one by one. You have a legal obligation if the Sinn Fein people don’t put up a new Deputy First Minister to call an election don’t you?
JB: That’s absolutely right. Last week Martin McGuinness resigned as Deputy First Minister, and what that means is that if the replacement is not put in place by five o’clock tomorrow evening, then it is incumbent upon me as Secretary of State to call an election within a reasonable period of time. And obviously what we are seeking to do is to work with the parties to see if we can bring them together to avoid that from taking place.

AM: At the moment there is no indication that another replacement will be offered by Sinn Fein. You’re going to go – you’ve got until five o’clock tomorrow. Do you wait until five o’clock before calling an election and you do it quickly then? What’s the time frame?
JB: Well, Sinn Fein obviously have indicated that they’re not intending to put a replacement forward. We’ve obviously been discussing – I’ve had extensive discussions with all of the parties over the last few days and I’m going straight back to Belfast straight after this programme to continue those discussions. But the clear indication, the increasing likelihood, is that we are moving towards an election. Obviously I’ll be considering the position at that point in time. My statutory responsibility is to call an election. But what that means is that there has to be an election campaign of 25 working days for the campaign itself, and it’s all of these issues I’m looking at very closely.

AM: So unless you delay it for a very, very long time, this is going to carry on right the way through the period when we’re supposed to be discussing Brexit. And that means that there will be no
Northern Ireland voice in those discussions, which according to the court case in London might even be illegal.

JB: Well, I think it’s important to understand that there has been already discussions with the Northern Ireland Executive. We have a joint ministerial committee. Indeed, the work that I’ve been doing in Northern Ireland, reaching out to communities, reaching out to business – but we still have ministers in place as well so it’s important to know that.

AM: You’ve got the First Minister, no Deputy First Minister, it’s very, very hard for Northern Ireland to give its voice properly. And this is the crucial point of the Brexit period coming up, just ahead of the triggering of Article 50. This is when they need to be engaged.

JB: Well, I think that they have been engaged and we obviously will continue to be advising the executive that ministers remain in place, so that elections occur in all sorts of different circumstances and we have structures that obviously ensure that people are invited. And so that will continue, and indeed, the work that I do as Secretary of State in talking to all of the different players and partners in Northern Ireland, getting their feedback, I think that has given us already a very good indication as to the issues that really matter and how we are determined to get the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland through the negotiations ahead.

AM: Theresa May made it very, very clear that Northern Ireland, like Scotland, she said, must be engaged in these conversations, these negotiations at the critical period. If Northern Ireland is in the middle of a general election throughout that period they can’t really be properly engaged can they?

JB: Well, we have had that engagement and we will continue to take those steps. And also I should stress that we are not delaying the timetable, we still remain absolutely committed to triggering the Article 50 process by no later than the end of March, and nothing changes that. We will obviously continue to
work, and actually my engagement is absolutely about bringing people together, bringing the parties together to see that we really ensure that there isn’t that sense of division appearing.

AM: Now, this is a complex crisis, but if after the election there is no resolution, the two parties still can’t work together in the – what happens next? Do you impose direct rule by ministers?

JB: Well, I’m not thinking about that. My absolute focus is how we bring the parties together. There is a – you’re right, Andrew there is a relatively short period of time after the election, it’s about three weeks that we have to see an executive being formed. In law, the simple alternative would be to call another election. But what I’m focused on is that we maintain the institutions. This is really significant. It’s important that we are working together to see that people are focused on the great opportunities for Northern Ireland, the real benefits that I see day in, day out, and how we need to ensure there is good communication that continues. But as I say, the reality, the probability, as I sit here today, is that we are moving towards an election, and how we continue to see that people are focused and ensure that communication is maintained.

AM: If that election, as I say, produces another kind of failed result, as it were, is there any possibility at all the British government would look towards a joint authority with the Irish government over Northern Ireland?

JB: To be absolutely straight, Andrew, I am not contemplating alternatives to devolved government in Northern Ireland, that is my absolute and resolute focus. I think what is my responsibility is to see that we are working with each of the parties to ensure that we are not looking at greater division. And my concern is that an election campaign will be divisive, will actually lead to greater distance between the parties at the end of that. And so it is that work therefore that I’m doing, and will continue to do, and would really encourage the parties themselves to think about these big
issues, on how they conduct that campaign and how we are able to build things back together again once that’s concluded.

AM: We’ve been talking about what kind of country we’re going to be after Brexit this morning, and Northern Ireland is very much a part of that country and so forth. There’s been a suggestion from the Chancellor, Philip Hammond, today that if we are forced out of access to the European markets we could slash corporation tax and become a very different kind of economy. Is that something you recognise?

JB: Well, in Northern Ireland we’ve actually said that we would like to see the devolution of corporation tax in Northern Ireland and actually the executive has indicated it would like to see a marrying of the corporation tax rates across the island of Ireland at 12.5 per cent. And so, you know, we’ve certainly contemplated how you devolve corporation tax, the benefit that that may attach to, but I certainly wouldn’t want to speculate more broadly.

AM: It would be a more free-trading, lower tax economy outside the EU after Brexit?

JB: Well, I think the Prime Minister has always been very clear that she wants the UK to be an open, outward-looking trading nation. She has stated that on a number of occasions. That’s that positive view that we have for the UK moving forward and how best to achieve that, and obviously ensuring that UK companies continue to have the best access to the ability to trade with an operate within the European Union.

AM: But when you read this morning that the UK will be outside the single market and outside the customs union, you’re not surprised by that are you?

JB: Well, I’m not going to speculate on what the Prime Minister is going to say on Tuesday. I don’t think that is helpful.

AM: You’re very welcome to.
JB: I’m sure that’s the case, but what the Prime Minister has been clear is that we are leaving the European Union. That means that it is how we then negotiate, how we look at our future. And as I’ve said, it is that open approach, that global Britain message that she’ll be giving on Tuesday as to how we set that forward.

AM: How can we possibly stay inside the single market and control migration? We can’t, can we?

JB: Well, I do not see this as a binary choice, because yes, of course we have a very clear approach in seeking to achieve that open approach for business, but also that very stark message that I do take, that the government takes from the EU referendum, that free movement as it exists today cannot continue into the future. I think we need not set ourselves –

AM: Is that’s the case, then we can’t be inside the single market, that much has always been clear.

JB: I don’t accept that there is this binary choice, this presentation of different alternatives. Equally, this language of hard and soft Brexit that equally I don’t recognise. I think we’re going into these negotiations to get the best possible deal, to set out that future for our country in a very positive way between friends, allies, neighbours, actually how we want to see the EU project itself to continue to succeed.

AM: In your view we could stay inside the single market?

JB: Well, the point is it’s not about staying inside. And how we are leaving the European Union. And therefore how you negotiate that new relationship, that new approach to our relationship with our European partners –

AM: It’s a market. We’re either in it or we’re outside it. So it is a binary choice.

JB: But it is – there are so many different aspects to this. Equally when you look at the customs union, there are different parts of that and we are analysing very closely and very carefully, the Prime Minister will be setting out more of the detail, more of our
ambitions, more of what we see as the future of our country outside of the European Union. But yes, still be part of Europe. The security arrangements that we have in place that we want to see continuing into the future too, that matter so much, for our European partners as well as ourselves. But I don’t see it in these stark terms. There is that negotiation to come and we should approach that with confidence and optimism.

(ends)