ANDREW MARR SHOW, JEREMY HUNT, MP

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 16TH JUNE, 2019
JEREMY HUNT, MP
FOREIGN SECRETARY

AM: Now one man who will be there if he gets through the next round is Jeremy Hunt who was a long serving and highly controversial Health Secretary before he took over from Boris Johnson at the Foreign Office. He used to say, 'health was going to be his last big job in politics,' but this morning he finds himself running second in the Tory leadership race to become our next Prime Minister. He’s with me now. Welcome Mr Hunt.

JH: Good morning Andrew.

AM: There is a sense of inevitability at the moment behind Boris Johnson’s campaign. How can you possibly catch him?

JH: Because I want to make an argument that what Boris offering, a hard stop at any cost on the 31st of October, means that he is effectively committing the country to no deal because we have holidays over the summer, we have a new European Commission, we have very few parliamentary sitting days, or an election if parliament chooses to stop that and my argument is, are those really the best options those very stark choices between a no deal Brexit or an election? Are they really the best that we as Conservatives can offer the country, and if I was chosen I’d be the first Prime Minister who’s been an entrepreneur, I’m a negotiator. I believe it is possible to offer better choices – that’s what negotiators do and that’s why I’m standing.

AM: Now you say therefore that you could reopen the negotiations and get a better deal. Can I put it to you there is not a shred of evidence that anybody on the other side of the argument is prepared to do that. Have you got any evidence at all that anybody’s prepared to do this?
JH: I believe that there is a deal there. I think there is evidence, when you talk to Europe –

AM: But that’s belief, that’s not –

JH: Let me answer the question, Andrew. When you talk to European leaders, as I do, they want to solve this problem. They say that if they were approached by a British Prime Minister, someone they were willing to deal with, who had ideas as to how to solve the Northern Irish border they would be willing to renegotiate the package. Now I’m not saying that’s going to be easy, but my point is simply this. If we are saying now that we’re going to choose headlong for no deal Brexit on 31st of October, or an election, those are very stark choices. Are they the best for Britain? And I’m sitting here arguing that we can negotiate better choices and offer those to the British people.

AM: We are already at the nub of the argument. Can I ask you directly whether the French President, Emmanuel Macron or Angela Merkel of Germany has ever said to you privately that they are prepared to reopen the Withdrawal Agreement?

JH: What they said is they are prepared to look at the whole package and you know, in particular they’re prepared to look at whether you could get much more detail onto the future relationship. Potentially that could be legally binding, let’s see, but much more detail so that you don’t need a backstop. And I think the heart of the issue here is that we will not get –

AM: So they have indicated to you they could reopen the backstop?

JH: They have said that they would be prepared to look at a deal that meant we didn’t need a backstop. And what I’m saying is should we not try, I’m not saying this is going to be easy but you
know, what they say is, if you’ve got an idea, we don’t have a border with the Republic of Ireland, you do. And if you’ve got an idea then we’ll look at it. And if you approach them with the right Prime Minister, someone they’re prepared to talk to, prepared to negotiate with, then I think if we unite as a Conservative Party we can find a deal that can get through. And I’m an optimist, Andrew. I’m preventing ... I think this is very very stark saying we’re going to plunge headlong out of the EU without a deal on the 31st of October. We should look and see if there are alternatives.

AM: I understand that. The reason that I’m intrigued by this is that both Macron and Merkel have said such different things in public about this. President Macron said very recently: “Under no circumstances and under no conditions will there be any renegotiation of the Withdrawal Agreement.” And Angela Merkel has said: “We have made it clear that the Withdrawal Agreement will not be changed.” And then you go to the Irish side, you’ve been mentioning the Irish side, Leo Varadkar, the Taoiseach says: “If we don’t have the backstop there is no deal. A time limit is effectively saying there could be a hard border once that time limit expires and that isn’t a backstop.” And again and again they’ve said the same kind of things. So are you really suggesting they’re saying something privately to you that’s very different from that?

JH: No. They are very –

AM: That could hardly be more explicit, could it?

JH: That is what they’re saying but they’re also saying privately and indeed publicly that they will look at the package, and what I’m saying at this moment when we have the chance to choose a Prime Minister who has been an entrepreneur and negotiator all his life, inside government and outside government, is this the moment to give up on getting a deal that we can get through the
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House of Commons. This is so important for our country. I don’t pretend and I would never pretend that this is going to be easy, but nor is it impossible. Look, if we do this it’s not impossible to do it before the 31st of October but it will be difficult. And that’s why I’m not prepared to commit –

AM: It is almost impossible. There are three negotiating weeks left and then all the legislation to do as well in October. It’s almost impossible to get this through before the end of October. You’ve hinted an extension. A lot of Conservatives watching this want to know if Jeremy Hunt becomes Prime Minister what is the final date by which we will certainly have left the EU?

JH: Look, people are always telling me in politics that things are impossible. This time last year people said it would be impossible to have a peace process in Yemen. They said it would be impossible to –

AM: By when?

JH: - solve the Junior Doctors contract dispute. They said it would be impossible to make a success of the London Olympics.

AM: By when?

JH: I’m not committing to a 31st of October hard stop at any costs because I don’t think you can make that guarantee and if you do make that guarantee if you go with the wrong approach -

AM: By the end of the year?

JH: If you go with the wrong approach then you are committing us to nothing other than a hard Brexit, a no deal Brexit.
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AM: So can you commit to us definitely being out by the end of this year?

JH: Look, a wise Prime Minister makes choices –

AM: You can’t.

JH: - on the basis of the choices that are actually in front of them. Now by the time we get to the 31st of October we may have parliament having changed the law in particular ways. We may have a new European Commission, we may have made very good progress in the negotiations about - I’ve been very clear. If there is no prospect on the 31st of October – let me say this Andrew, if there is no prospect of getting a deal that can get through parliament on the 31st of October, then I will be prepared to leave without a deal. Because in the end the risk of no Brexit, a democratic - is far worse than the risk of no deal.

AM: The other side of that, if there is a prospect by when do you get us out is my question?

JH: Then how can anyone sensibly answer that question when you don’t know the context? And I’m not going to sit here in front of –

AM: So we may still be in by the time of the next election?

JH: No. That is completely unacceptable. I think this is the way we deliver Brexit and I’ve said, I said to you very clearly, if there’s no prospect of a good deal after we start talking to them then we would leave without a deal. But I don’t think we need to be offering that stark choice now.

AM: You become Prime Minister. One of things that is in your power as Prime Minister, looking at how the negotiations are
going on is to ask for an extension. My question to you is very
straight forward and very simple, how long do you ask for?

JH: You can't answer that question until you know the choices you
face. You're asking me to predict what the world will look like on
October 31st. And you must know, Andrew, that that is a ridiculous
thing to ask a Prime Minister or somebody who wants to be Prime
Minister to decide when you don't know what choices there are.
If there's no prospect of a deal then I'm out. But if there is a
prospect of a deal – and what I'm saying the difference between
me and Boris is that I'm saying I would try for a deal. I'm not
going to create a set of circumstances that makes it all but
impossible to get a deal because I think we should be offering the
country some better choices.

AM: Brexiteers in your party will be watching this with some
dismay because they'll be saying there you go. Boris Johnson,
whatever you think of him, is offering us something different. He's
offering us a clear determined promise that we'll be out by the 31st
of October come what may. Jeremy Hunt was a remainer and he's
still got deep down remainer instincts and he is really the
continuity candidate. In the cruel words you yourself have used,
he's Theresa May in trousers.

JH: Continuity is not the same as loyalty. I am proud to have been
loyal to two Prime Ministers. I will be completely different to both
and with my background as a negotiator I have profound issues
with Theresa May’s approach which I argued privately in Cabinet.
I did not think that we should be trying to persuade parliament to
accept the backstop, but of course she made that decision and I
supported that loyalty. This is a different approach. This is saying
we have to change the backstop and we have to leave the
European Union if we possibly can in an orderly way. And I believe
that I’m the person that can do that.
AM: Because you have not been consistent in your views on this, have you? You said after the referendum was over, after the 2016 referendum that you supported us staying inside the single market. In fact you said it was absolutely essential that we remain in the single market. “The British government needs to make it an explicit national objective to remain in the single market.” You have junked that?

JH: I said that. I wrote that article a week after the referendum result and it’s no surprise to anyone that I was on the Remain side of that debate. But since then I have been absolutely consistent that we must leave the European Union, we must leave the European Union cleanly. The people who’ve changed their position are the people who voted against Theresa May’s deal and then voted for it. I have been consistent in voting to get us out of the European Union as quickly as possible.

AM: But you haven’t been consistent also on your view of the referendum, because again – this is early after the referendum you said: “The people have spoken but we did not vote on the terms of our departure. We need to negotiate a deal and put it to the British people, either in a referendum or through a fresh general election. I think it’s important that people have their say on the terms of that deal.” They haven’t had their say on the terms of that deal – why shouldn’t they now?

JH: Yes, they have. You may not have noticed but we had a General Election, Andrew.

AM: And there was no terms of the deal then. No terms.

JH: There was. There were two major parties who both said, including Labour actually at that stage, that we would leave the European Union, the single market and the customs union. Over 80% of the country voted for those two parties.

AM: But we were miles away from a deal. We didn’t know the terms of the deal at that point.

JH: We did. We knew the type of Brexit we were voting for. We’ve had democratic endorsement. I am like millions of
Remainers up and down the country who voted remain but want us to get on with Brexit, believe we can make a great success of Brexit, believe the economy has been extremely robust since Brexit, contrary to what was pledged. But most of all because we’re democrats and as one of the oldest democracies in the world it’s a simple matter of trust. Are we the kind of country where people who do my sort of job do what the people tell them? And we must be that country.

AM: Would you ever vote to bring down a Conservative government going for no deal?
JH: No.

AM: You’ve also said that you are a negotiator, that’s one of your big pitches, you’re a successful negotiator and you mentioned a moment ago the NHS doctors. Now that was one of the most angry, divisive and still not forgotten disputes in the NHS history. Meanwhile, after your presiding over the NHS, for a long time the NHS experienced the worst winter crisis on its record. The biggest spending squeeze in its history, the waiting lists hit 4 million for the first time and the flagship targets were missed for years. A&E waiting times, cancer treatments and the waiting list targets all were missed and you had the junior doctors strike on your watch. And as I say, up and down the country junior doctors are still livid with you personally. That’s not a great record as a negotiator.

JH: Andrew, if I’m Prime Minister I will be the kind of Prime Minister who takes difficult decisions. I won’t be someone who courts unpopularity. When I started as Health Secretary, as you know I was the longest serving Health Secretary by the end, I met a father who had lost his son a week old because of a mistake, a medical mistake and the NHS does lots of wonderful things, but this was a terrible mistake. He had to write over 400 letters and emails before the NHS would tell him the truth about what happened. And that was wrong. And the culture was wrong and I
did take some difficult decisions, but by the end of my time as Health Secretary nearly 3 million more patients were using good or outstanding hospitals, compared to when I started. And yes, we did have enormous pressure in A&Es, we still have pressure in A&E because of the ageing population, and that was why I negotiated an extra £20 billion funding increase for the NHS so that we can employ –

AM: At the end of a very, very tough historical squeeze.
JH: Yes, of course, but I negotiated that so that we could get the extra doctors, the extra nurses. The biggest increase in modern times of nurse training places and doctor training places – up by a quarter. So that was the record I was proud of.

AM: Let me ask you one more thing, not about the past but about your pledges for the future. You want to cut Corporation Tax up to 12 and a half percent. That costs about £13 billion. You also want to spend more on the Army, on schools and this morning on helping people who want to keep their relatives living with them at home. Huge, huge spending commitments. Where is the money coming from?
JH: Well as someone who set up their business I am rearing to turn our economy into the fastest growing, most high tech, greenest, most pro-business economy in Europe.
AM: But you need to balance the books.
JH: So the biggest, most expensive pledge I’ve made would be to cut corporation tax to Irish levels to turbo charge our economy. When you do that you can start to see how we could get our GDP growth rate up from one and a half percent to maybe three percent – American levels – and that is the kind of exciting way that we will find more money for public services and be able to cut taxes, all the things that Conservatives want to do. But you need someone who’s got a feel as to how we can really power up our economy, and that’s me.
AM: You are of course also Foreign Secretary. Richard Ratcliffe was talking to us earlier on. He said he got ‘mixed signals’ from your yesterday about his wife’s plight. Why was that?

JH: Well, what I was being very honest when I met Richard yesterday is that sometimes you hear signals from the Iranian regime that they want to resolve this issue. And sometimes they seem to go hardline. And you know what I say to the Iranian government is whatever the disputes that we have between us countries and we’re not on the same side in many issues as you’ve also been talking about in your programme, there is an innocent woman at the heart of this who has a daughter who just turned five last week, has a loving husband as you’ve seen. They need to be reunited. Don’t drag her into it. She is innocent. She must be allowed to come home.

AM: You’re also in dispute this morning with the Iranians because of what you’ve said about the culpability of the attacks on the tankers. Can I ask you do you know that they were responsible or are you just picking up American intelligence and echoing it?

JH: Well we have done our own intelligence assessment and the phrase we used is ‘almost certain.’ You know we’ve got videos of what happened, we’ve seen evidence, we don’t believe anyone else could have done this. And you know what is extraordinary is that when you have that clear evidence of tankers being blown up in the Gulf, an incredibly destabilising thing, we had Jeremy Corbyn saying this is America’s fault. And this just I’m afraid indicates that when it comes to the future safety and security of our country, this man should not be let into Downing Street.

AM: Do you think we’re drifting to war in the Gulf?

JH: Well this is the great risk in a situation that we’re in because both sides in this dispute think that the other side wouldn’t want a war and we are urging all sides to de-escalate. Having spoken to President Trump I am absolutely clear that for America they want this to end in negotiations that see Iran stop its destabilising
activities in Lebanon through Hezbollah, in Yemen where they’re firing missiles into Saudi Arabia, on the Gulf as we’ve seen. That is the long term solution here.

AM: Back to the little local difficulties, are there any circumstances during this Conservative race where you will pull out to allow somebody else a clear run? Any circumstances?
JH: I am the alternative to Boris. I’m offering a different approach which allows us to negotiate a deal that we can get through parliament. I am the person who can do that as the Foreign Secretary who knows these governments, as a negotiator – I will stay and make that case to the end because I think our country needs better choices than the ones that he is offering.

AM: And would you trust Boris Johnson with Iran for instance if he’s Prime Minister?
JH: Well, I’m the one who wants to be Prime Minister. If Boris Johnson becomes Prime Minister I will serve him loyally and do everything I can to make his government a success but I would hope he would do the same for me.

Ends