ANDREW MARR SHOW, CHUKA UMUNNA

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CHUKA UMUNNA, MP

AM: My next guest, Chuka Umunna, the Labour MP is seen by many as the unofficial shop steward of all of those who want to stop Brexit. So how did you feel, Chuka Umunna, at hearing Andrew Gwynne from the Labour frontbench saying that in another referendum Labour’s position would be pro-Brexit?

CU: Well let’s see. I would never campaign for us to leave the European Union. There is no such thing as a jobs first deal. No deal that involves us leaving the European Union will do anything other than huge harm to our economy and I couldn’t do that to my constituents. And in the fact the majority of Labour, our members, our supporters, our voters do not want us to leave the European Union and they want us to have a people’s vote, because of the mess that we’re in. And let’s not forget the urgency of the situation. You know, we have got 103 days to the scheduled day of exit and that’s why Andrew is absolutely right to say that we cannot be wasting time delaying bringing forward this meaningful vote on the Prime Minister’s deal. It is a fiction to suggest that she is going to be able to get this through the House of Commons at any point at all, so absolutely that should be brought forward as soon as possible, and then we need to clear the deck and consider the other options. Because the issue with the House of Commons is there’s no controlling mind in the House of Commons. The government’s not running the show, the opposition isn’t.

AM: You’re not controlling?

CU: No, no, absolutely nobody is.

AM: I’m slightly joking but if

CU: If only, if only.
AM: - you’ve seen the Sunday Times this morning. Can you tell us a little bit about the conversations between Cabinet ministers and Labour MPs about a second referendum?

CU: Well look, I think it’s absolutely right that we should be having conversations across the parties on these issues. We’re in a moment of crisis. We should be putting party political differences to one side and working together in the national interest to try and resolve the mess that we’re in. And so I mean look, there’s a lot of excitement about that Sunday Times front page, but over the last year there have been lots of informal discussions between people from different parties, involving Cabinet ministers, Shadow Cabinet ministers and the rest. And that’s as it should be.

AM: Have you talked to cabinet ministers yourself?
CU: I have over the last year or so, not least when I come on shows like this.
AM: Including David Livington?
CU: I’m not going to go into who specifically I’ve spoken to. I don’t - I haven’t been involved in the specific meeting that was referred to in the Sunday Times, but I don’t think this should be controversial.

AM: From your point of view the thought that there are members of Theresa May’s Cabinet who are thinking and planning for a second referendum is not a shock?

CU: It’s not a shock because look at the options that are available to the House of Commons. There is no majority for us to leave without a deal which is something that your next guest, Liam Fox, seems to ignore along with other members of the ERG in the Conservative Party. The so called Norway option where you stay within the economic structures of the EU but you don’t have so much say, that has been put to the House of Commons in votes on the Trade Bill and on the EU Withdrawal Act. Huge majorities,
in spite of mine and others best efforts. Huge majorities against that and therefore you know, in the end the only other way forward that there is is to refer this back to the people if there’s no agreement in the House of Commons.

AM: There are two problems from your point of view I would suggest and an anti-Brexit MP, which is that the anti-Brexit MPs are completely divided between as it were, the Norway option people, Stephen Kinnock and many Conservatives, Nicky Morgan on the one side and people like yourself and Anna Soubry who are concentrating on a second referendum. So the anti-Brexit vote as it were is badly divided and you’re going to get nowhere until you can cross that divide. Are you winning people over your second referendum position away from the Norway option?

CU: I’m honest enough to say look, do we have the numbers for a people’s vote on this Brexit mess right now in the House of Commons? No, we don’t. But I think that this is why we have to move forward with this process because I think the position of Members of Parliament will change according to what happens. So the first thing is get this meaningful vote done so it’s clear where the House of Commons is on the Prime Minister’s so called deal.

AM: The Prime Minister is going to bring it back in the middle of January, we read. Is there really a way of the House of Commons making her do it earlier?

CU: Well, that is unacceptable for – and irresponsible I might say for a prime minister to leave our country in limbo for a number of weeks while –

AM: She’s trying to negotiate a better deal though.

CU: There is no better deal at the moment and the EU are absolutely clear about this and it’s no good frankly her accusing former prime ministers. I mean she talks about Tony Blair, John Major of course is an advocate for a people’s vote as well. It’s no good her complaining that they are undermining her position
because nobody’s done more to undermine their position than she has by basically seeking to square this circle of fantasy that was sold by Boris Johnson and many others which has proved impossible to do. That’s what’s undermined her position.

AM: Let’s look at the other big problem with your position which is simply that people were told first time round, first time round that this was a once in a lifetime yes or no, absolutely clear democratic moment. And in that democratic moment they voted by a big and clear majority to leave the EU and now they’re being told to think again. Here’s Angela Rayner, one of your colleagues very close to Jeremy Corbyn. Here’s what she thinks:

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Saying that we’ll just have a second referendum and everything will be fine I think is – is a very serious position and it undermines democracy in itself. People made the decision. People made the decision and you can’t keep going back....

AM: Exactly. They made the decision and you can’t keep going back, that’s what she said.

CU: Well, I think she’s right to say this is serious and I’m not sure anything we will do will settle this matter for a generation. It’s going to be a constant source of discussion. But hang on just a minute, here’s the thing. I don’t see how you can thwart the will of the people if in the end they are the ones that determine what we do here. Yes, we know what the will of the people was two and a half years ago, we don’t know what the will of the people is now. Not least two million young voters who are going to be affected more than any other group by this who have so far had no say on this whatsoever. And the point is, I come back to this point again for your viewers. If parliament is gridlocked and there’s no way of resolving the impasse and no consensus can be
met in parliament then how else do you resolve this other than referring it back to the people? And what actually has united people is whether you’re on my side of the argument or you want a so-called hard Brexit, nobody is happy here.

AM: Nobody’s happy. We’ve talked to John Curtice who is the nearest thing this country has to an unimpeachable authority for everything and he says there is no clear evidence of a move in public opinion after the first vote, so you might get exactly the same result in another referendum. Can I ask you what you think the question should be?

CU: My own view is that the question should give the option of our current deal as a member of the EU which is the far superior deal, but there should also be a specified hard Brexit option there. For those of your viewers who feel they are being denied the Brexit that they really wanted they have got to be sure that that option is on the paper. And I’m very clear that if we get to this people’s vote I know I will be campaigning for us to stay in the European Union because I believe that’s in the best interests of my constituents. But if you want us to leave you have the right in that scenario to campaign for the real Brexit straightforward –

AM: So you want an In or Out is your view, a straightforward In or Out?

CU: Yes, but the fundamental difference I think between now and when we last had this referendum on the EU is that we will have fixed specified propositions. That is the key thing in terms of the hard Brexit. I think people realise that you cannot have your cake and eat it now and that’s why this is going to be very different. In the end it was a speculative debate on what we could or couldn’t get if we voted to leave the European Union. We now know the answer to that question and that is why this is very different in my view to 2016.
AM: Very briefly. Andrew Gwynne is planning and preparing for another General Election. He thinks that’s going to happen. Do you think that’s the likely outcome of all of this?

CU: It is possible. I think it’s quite unlikely but it’s absolutely possible and I do hope you know that the Labour frontbench put down that Motion of No Confidence in the government, if anything just so that we can see whether or not we’re going to end up in a General Election. But let nobody be under any illusions here. A General Election if not going to solve this Brexit issue. Whoever the government is they’re going to have this mess to deal with.

AM: The same old questions come back. Chuka Umunna, thanks very much indeed for talking to us.

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