

MICHAEL GOVE

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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(Please check against delivery (uncorrected copies))

AM: My final guest this morning is the Cabinet Office Minister, Michael Gove. Michael Gove, welcome. Are you going to impose new restrictions on Manchester?

MG: Well, we hope to agree a new approach with Andy Burnham, the Mayor. I listened to what Andy said earlier. I'm sure that he wants the best for the people of Greater Manchester. We certainly do. So I hope that we can find a way through together.

AM: Isn't it time for the prime minister to call him today?

MG: Well, the prime minister's team have been constantly in touch with Andy and his team, and the sort of outlines of what we want to do are pretty clear. We recognise that the so-called Tier 3 restrictions are lower in some parts of the country and not enough; what we want to do is to work with local authorities and local leaders in order to find the right approach so there's the maximum amount of local cooperation combined, that we use both their knowledge on the ground and the support of central government to get to the right outcome. And the sooner we get to the right outcome the better it is for the health and indeed the economy of the people of Greater Manchester.

AM: To be absolutely clear, you say you hope not to impose restrictions, but if you can't get agreement will you?

MG: Well, at this stage, in this context, we want to secure agreement.

AM: I understand that. I'm saying will you impose restrictions if you can't get agreement?

MG: Well, yeah, we're going to have to look at the position. But we absolutely want to work with the Mayor and the political leadership of Greater Manchester, because every day that we delay there is a risk of the virus spreading further, more people being in hospital, more people as a result, sadly and tragically dying, and got agreement from the political and civic leadership in Liverpool and in Lancashire. Greater Manchester we want to bring on board as well.

AM: Did you bully and cajole those leaders to get agreement from them?

MG: No, we worked effectively, I think, and cooperatively with them, because there's a widespread recognition that unless we deal effectively with the virus in those areas where the incidence is high, then we won't be able to improve the health of all.

AM: Peter Foster, who's the Labour leader of Ribble Council, said he was bullied and cajoled and blackmailed into agreeing. Mohammed Iqbal, who's the leader of Pendle Council, said, 'Lancashire leaders have been blackmailed into doing a deal by government.' And Jo Anderson, the Mayor of Liverpool whose brother has just died, said that 'to try to tell people that we supported this package is an absolute blatant lie.'

MG: Well, it is the case that in every part of Lancashire and in Liverpool agreement was reached.

AM: Because you blackmailed and cajoled them.

MG: No, it's because we a) were very clear about the public health problem, and b) provided economic support. I was listening very carefully to Andy Burnham earlier, someone I, you know, like and admire, but he was simultaneously saying that on the one hand the incidence of infection in Greater Manchester was – it was falling around the country so we didn't need restrictions, but if enough money were given to Greater Manchester then he would accept them. So there's an incoherence in the approach of some politicians in this matter. The government is perfectly clear: we b

believe that we should have appropriate restrictions in aid of public health and we also provide generous financial and economic support to individuals and businesses in infected areas. Andy has a straightforward choice: is he going to put public health and the economy of the people of Greater Manchester first? If he is, then we can secure agreement today.

AM: Well, what he says he is doing is trying to protect the plight of very low paid workers who are having a horrible, horrible time. You keep telling us, rightly, that the virus is no less lethal now than it was in March. And if that's the case why was it in March you were paying 80 per cent of people's salaries and now it's only 67 per cent?

MG: Well, actually if you look at both the job support scheme and the universal credit top-up that it will be the case in many cases that people will be receiving 80 per cent or so of their salary. But the fundamental incoherence in the position of Andy Burnham is that on the one hand, as I say, he says, actually the virus is not spreading at a rate that merits these restrictions, and then he's saying but actually I will have them if I have the money. If he were being truly, truly concerned about public health, then he would say let's have these restrictions done. And the other thing is the earlier we have the restrictions in those areas where there is high incidence, the better for the economy of those areas because we stop the infection spreading in a way which will do further damage to the economy as well as to public health. And the thing I find perplexing is that Andy is saying let's not have these restrictions in Manchester at all, but Rachel Reeves, for Labour nationally, is saying let's have even tighter restrictions than those we've done –

AM: The whole country with an economic package behind it. I come back to the point –

MG: But again Labour have not spelt out what it is that is wrong with the level of economic support that we're providing, and additionally, as you're questioning brought out, how does it help

us to defeat the virus where incidence is high if businesses in areas where the incidence is low are closed? And again, Labour's position is not different in London and Manchester, it's different depending on which day you ask the question. So last week ...

AM: I'm sorry, I have to ask occasional questions. That's the kind of way it works.

MG: And I have to give comprehensive answers.

AM: You certainly do. (talking together)

MG: Show that Labour have three different positions. They voted – Rishi Sunak asked if they could vote in favour of them, they declined to vote in favour of them, and now they're calling for stronger restrictions.

AM: Rishi Sunak said, 'whatever it takes.' Is that now gone?

MG: No.

AM: So if it's whatever it takes, you could resolve this problem for Manchester, which is very, very damaging to both sides, you could do it within an hour by getting Rishi Sunak to offer just a bit more money, not for Andy Burnham, but for lower paid workers in Manchester and the area who really need that money to survive day by day, week by week. Why don't you?

MG: This problem could have been solved days ago if the political leadership in Greater Manchester had recognised the scale of the crisis. And also the scale of the package, the economic package that we're providing does mean that for someone who's facing very difficult circumstances, that they will receive not just the support from the job support scheme but also a universal credit top-up as well. And it is the case that civic leaders in Lancashire and in Liverpool have accepted that it is necessary to act in this way, and financial support has been provided. So the question there is why are Labour explicitly standing out in Greater Manchester from doing what is right for the NHS, what is right to fight this disease, and what is right for the long term health of the economy. And why is it that the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, who's calling for national restrictions, won't even himself pick up

the phone to say to Andy Burnham, show some leadership in Manchester, put the NHS first?

AM: Alright, we were promised in all of this clear rules and restrictions. People are getting very, very confused. Under your new system, for instance, soft play areas in Lancashire are lethal and must be closed, but soft play areas across the border in Liverpool are absolutely fine and stay open. Whereas in Liverpool, gyms are lethal and must be closed, but across the border in Lancashire gyms are fine and must stay open. This is completely ridiculous isn't it?

MG: No. It's a consequence of talking to local leaders. The approach we're taking is we're saying there are certain general Tier 3 restrictions, and then we're going to talk to you, we're going to utilise your local knowledge and your requests and we're going to tailor the package to take account of your specific needs. So critics of this scheme can't have their cake and eat it. If we are negotiating with local authorities and local authorities say this is the tailored package that we want, and we provide economic support, then we get the measures required, the measures that the Chief Medical Officer has made clear are necessary in order to deal with this disease. We stand ready to have a tailored package for Greater Manchester; Andy Burnham prefers not to engage.

AM: If this scheme doesn't work, are we not inevitably facing some kind of national scheme?

MG: No. I think that the evidence that we have at the moment shows that Tier 3 plus localised additional tailored restrictions can bring about a reduction in the infection rate. Of course we're ready to do whatever it takes. But I was concerned again by what Rachel Reeves said earlier. She first of all said that a circuit breaker, a national circuit breaker for Labour would be two to three weeks, and then she said 28 days, and then she said, under your questioning, Andrew, that it might be possible that we would

have repeated national circuit breakers without any criteria for when we enter and when we exit.

AM: I was asking her about her policy, and I want to ask you about your policy. Test and trace, isn't it true that the test and trace system, which has cost this country nine billion pounds, is having a marginal impact on transmission rates?

MG: No.

AM: That's that SAGE says. Are they wrong?

MG: It is the case that we've improved and are continuing improving the test and trace system. There are two things –

AM: Here's your advisers, SAGE: 'relatively low levels of engagement and testing delays. This system is having a marginal impact on transmission at the moment.'

MG: That was then, this is now. The improvements that we've made –

AM: I can give you now, the first week of October, which is the last week for which we have figures. Test and trace found around 90,000 positive tests and spoke to 77,000 of those people. But the ONS system, which your government depends upon, found 183,000 new infections. So therefore the majority of people were neither tested nor traced in the first week of October.

MG: Well, several things to say there. The first thing is the number of people who are being tested is higher than ever before. 300,000 tests were administered on Friday. That's higher than any other European country. The next thing to say is that the contact tracing effort is improving all the time. Local health protection teams are doing very well. But the other thing that is also clear –

AM: I'm sorry, it's not improving.

G: Yes.

AM: Trace has reached 63% of their contacts last week, in the last week we've got figures for and that is the lowest percentage since the system was launched. As the virus speeds up the system is slowing down and that is not going to work.

G: This is the specific thing. It's not that the system is slowing down, it is that the virus is accelerating fast. If you do have an increased incidence in infection then any test and trace system of whatever kind has less utility. Because a test and trace system is specifically designed to be at its most effective when you're bringing infection rates down. Which is why we want to take the measures to bring infection rates down in Greater Manchester and elsewhere so testing and tracing can work better. But you have to have a holistic approach. You have to bring the two together.

AM: At the moment it's not working and the Boston Consulting Group Consultants who designed it and running it are getting £7,000 a day for their trouble. Is that a good spending of public money?

G: Yes.

AM: Yes? £7,000 for consultants a day?

G: Two things. Firstly, it's absolutely vital that we have all the expertise required from the private and the public sector in order to improve testing. As I pointed out earlier, we have a higher level of testing in this country than in any other European country, we're improving contact tracing all the time. Local health protection teams are doing particularly well in that regard. Separately, I've been clear, as my colleague Lord Agnew in the Cabinet Office has, that we need to reduce our spend on consultants overall, but in the meantime we'll do whatever it takes to make sure that we protect the NHS. So if you look at what we've done for example – earlier in this crisis dealing with ventilators, people criticised us then –

AM: Let's not talk about ventilators now –

G: No, but it's a valid comparison.

AM: it may be a valid comparison but let's talk about –

G: The National Audit Office looked at it, said that Cabinet Office had got value for money.

AM: Let's talk about what's happening now, because this is a behavioural question, it's about people's behaviour. You're a libertarian, is it a good idea to give the police all the data from track and trace because that means – we were just talking to a behavioural scientist a moment ago who said the trouble is with higher restrictions and higher penalties and higher fines fewer people engage in the system and therefore it is a completely counterproductive measure.

G: No, I don't believe it's counterproductive. I think that actually the behaviour effects show that the majority of people, the overwhelming majority of people want to be part of a national effort to fight the virus. And of course there will be some, a very very small minority who will be you know, heedless of the consequences of their actions, but the other thing is that the police, to be fair to them, are operating things so far as I can see in a very proportionate way, they engage and they explain well before they enforce. We all know that people may make innocent errors are an appropriate word can mean that their innocent error can be corrected by any of us, but where you do get persistent, flagrant and deliberate breaching of the rules, then it is appropriate for action to be taken.

AM: Let's turn to Brexit. Will you prefer there to be a free trade agreement with the EU?

G: Yes.

AM: You've said that all the way through. The government says that trade talks are now over. Are trade talks over?

G: I think the EU effectively ended the current round of talks last week. It was the case that we were making progress and then the EU retreated from that and indeed at the EU Council last week the original commitment that was there in their sort of draft communiqué to intensive talks, the word intensive was taken out. That wasn't just a cosmetic excision, it reflected the fact that over the previous two weeks we haven't seen from the EU the production of the legal text required in order for there to be

progress and as one of our negotiators pointed out, it was more like performance art than it was a dedicated attempt to reach a conclusion, so we formed the conclusion that unless their approach changes that they're not interested in – in effect they've drawn stumps on progress.

AM: I can't really tell whether this is sabre rattling or whether the door is still slightly ajar for more talks.

G: It is ajar. We hope that the EU will change their position. We're certainly not saying that if they do change their position that we can't talk to them. But I think it's only fair also that we communicate one other thing, which is that we are ready, if required, to leave on what have been called Australian terms. That's not going to be a picnic.

AM: Could be called Mongolian or Afghan terms as well as Australian.

G: Well the key thing about it is that we are taking the steps alongside business to be ready for that. And the other thing which is important again and our communications campaign later today will make this clear, is that the steps that business need to take, whether or not we have a Canada Free Trade Agreement or we leave on Australian terms, are very very similar and the great thing is that business has risen to that challenge in a very pragmatic way.

AM: Except you have always warned about the dangers of leaving without a deal. You told the Daily Mail back in March last year; 'We didn't vote to leave without a deal, that wasn't the message of the campaign I help lead us. During that campaign we said we should do a deal with the EU and be part of the network of free trade deals that covers all of Europe, from Iceland to Turkey. Leaving without a deal would not honour that commitment.' And you said, I mean the problem is that your critics said at the time, actually this deal is going to be much much harder than Michael

Gove suggests and they may not get it. And here is what you said at the time in response to that:

(film clip, 19 April 2016))

Gove: The day after we vote to leave we hold all the cards and we can choose the path that we want.

It's also important to realise that while we calmly take our time to change the law the one thing which will not change is our ability to trade freely with Europe. The In campaign often argues that we would find it impossible to reach a trading agreement with EU nations after we vote leave. While there are of course some questions up for negotiation which will occupy our highly skilled Foreign Office civil servants, resolving them fully and properly won't be any more complicated or onerous than the day to day work that they undertake now.

(end of clip)

AM: Are you embarrassed seeing that back?

G: No.

AM: Why not?

G: Well the first thing to say is that we've seen the EU behave in a way, particularly in the course of the last two weeks, that has been designed to draw back from the progress that we were making towards that deal. And I made three arguments then. The first is that the technical work was work for which our Foreign Office civil servants would be more than a match, that is absolutely true. The second thing is, that free trade agreements would be collectively in our interests.

AM: True.

G: And the third thing is that we hold cards and we do and it is the case that we take control of our destiny. And if we choose to leave –

AM: Without a deal which is what you said would not happen and your critics said would happen.

G: We do have a deal.

AM: We've got a Withdrawal Agreement, we do not have a trade deal.

G: Well, not yet.

AM: You were talking specifically about a trade deal in both of those quotes. That's what you meant by that.

G: No, no, no. Both of those –

AM: But you promised....

G: both of those arguments were made. That argument in 2016, the argument I made in 2019 about the context that we were in before we had a Withdrawal Agreement. We have. We've left. Now we need to decide the basis on which we conclude some important trade aspects, but as I said earlier, whether we leave on Canadian or Australian terms –

AM: or no terms.

G: Well, Australian terms, most of the work that is required by government and by business is broadly the same.

AM: Do you think the public are going to thank you for leaving the EU without any kind of trade deal in the middle of a global pandemic?

G: I think the public, like me, would rather that we did have a free trade agreement, but we need to be ready for every eventuality. But more than that, what the public would not thank us for is signing up to a deal where the EU control our laws, control the way in which we exercise our freedoms and control our territorial waters. Ultimately they want us to take back control.

Ends