

THE ANDREW MARR SHOW

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NATHALIE LOISEAU

EUROPE MINISTER FOR THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT

AM: Nathalie Loiseau, thanks for joining us. The crucial problem this weekend, post the summit, seems to be whether the British idea for some kind of backstop or insurance policy can be time-limited. And in London Dominic Raab and others say it must be time-limited. Is there any chance at all, in your view, of the 27 accepting that?

NL: Well, as you know, we want a good agreement. We're working hard on it. We are behind Michel Barnier, who is doing a terrific job. And we need it urgently. This withdrawal agreement is almost ready, but we still have to fix the question of the Irish border. And we have to have a definite answer, or at least no temporary measures which disappear and we don't know what to do after that. This is the question that we have. The backstop, the idea of the backstop is that we use it until or unless we don't have another better solution, we know that. But we don't know what's going to be our future relationship. As close, as tight as possible. But still we need to fix the question of the Irish border.

AM: And for that reason this backstop idea cannot be temporary. Cannot be time-limited.

NL: Well, we need to have a British answer to what we have proposed. The ball is in London's court and we are waiting and it's about a question of weeks now until we are sure that we can have a good agreement. But on the Irish border issue we agreed together, London and the 27, that the situation has to be as similar as possible to the current one. Meaning no hard border, no controls between Northern and Southern Ireland. So there has to be a solution. We cannot only rely on negotiation about a future relationship.

AM: But you must understand, surely, Nathalie Loiseau, it's very difficult for the British government to accept that one part of the UK, Northern Ireland, has a different customs and trading relationship with the EU than the rest of the UK. That's dividing the UK down the middle.

NL: Right. This is something that has been fixed by London. The decision to leave the European Union has been taken by the United Kingdom, not by the 27, and we have this common knowledge that there has to be a proper solution for Northern Ireland, for political reasons, reasons related to the peace process, and economic reasons. So this has to be fixed by London. Whether London wants to belong to the customs union for the future is a possible solution as well, and it's up to the UK to decide. We are open to these sorts of solutions, provided that rights and obligations remain balanced between the UK and the European Union. Really we are waiting for a workable solution coming from London.

AM: But you know, in some parallel universe, if there was a suggestion that Corsica or Brittany had a different customs relationship from the rest of France, the French government could never accept it, could you?

NL: The question is not asked in France because we are not leaving the European Union and because there is not this question of hard border. You remember in December we agreed with London on the basic principles of the withdrawal agreement. These basic principles were about the situation of citizens on both sides of the channel, the financial settlement, and settling this question of the Irish border. And we had agreed that there has to be a backstop if we don't find a better solution in the future relationship. So here we are, we have to have this answer and we have to have it now. There cannot be a transition period, we cannot work on the future, until we have a proper answer on the Irish border issue.

AM: But if the only answer that the EU accepts would be an answer that divides the UK into two territories, which Theresa May says no British Prime Minister could accept, then we are heading ineluctably and inevitably towards no deal.

NL: So until the British side comes with another solution we are open to listen to what Prime Minister May would have to propose. But we are still waiting and time is running.

AM: Your country is planning already for no deal. You've published a draft piece of legislation in the National Assembly which suggests the question of visas for British people coming to France in the event of no deal. Now, I know President Macron has spoken about this as well, but can you give me a complete guarantee that there are no circumstances in which British people coming to France would require to apply for visas first?

NL: Well, what we have said, we have explained to our MPs what would happen if we don't take action and if there is a no deal. The reason why we are having this draft Bill is precisely to avoid chaos on March 30<sup>th</sup>. If we do nothing there would be sort of a chaos. There would be no circulation between the UK and the European Union and the situation of British residents or British tourists would not be solved. So this is the reason why we are presenting this draft Bill. Measures which will be taken regarding British citizens living in France or coming to France.

AM: 150,000 of them.

NL: We want them to come. We want them to stay. But this has to be reciprocal. We have a high priority, this is the situation of French citizens living in the United Kingdom. We will do as much as the British authorities do for our citizens.

AM: Well, I know there's a lot of frustration about aspects of the British political scene, but nonetheless Theresa May has given an absolutely unequivocal promise to French citizens living at the moment in the UK and citizens of other EU countries in the UK,

their rights will be respected come what may, under all circumstances. Why can France not do the same for British citizens living there?

NL: Well, we are fully committed to preserving the rights of British citizens living in France or coming to France, and I have come to London, I have spoken to Dominic Raab on this issue, saying that we should not play with our citizens. Now we need to know exactly what the British have in mind if there is no deal. But let me come on to come back to a simple idea, let's have a good withdrawal agreement because everything is set in this draft withdrawal agreement regarding citizens' rights, and it is the better solution.

AM: Alright. One very quick question at the end there: is there going to be a November summit, do you think?

NL: If there is sufficient progress towards a withdrawal agreement, we'll be happy to make a summit. But there is no use meeting heads of state and government if negotiations have not come to an agreement.

AM: Nathalie Loiseau, thanks very much indeed for talking to us this morning.

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