Ken Clarke attacks 'silly' EU debate

THE ANDREW MARR SHOW

INTERVIEW:
KEN CLARKE, MP

CONSERVATIVE

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ANDREW MARR:
Now Ken Clarke probably held more high profile jobs in the cabinet than any politician still sitting in the House of Commons. He has seen it all. But he’s soon to be unshackled, leaving Parliament in May after 44 years as an MP. This morning he’s in our Nottingham studio. Welcome.

KEN CLARKE:
Morning. Can I begin by correcting you? I’m not intending to leave in May. That’s up to my constituents. I’m going to stand again actually.

ANDREW MARR:
(laughs) I’m so sorry.

KEN CLARKE:
I enjoy being a backbencher in the House of Commons.
ANDREW MARR:
I do apologise. That’s Barney Jones’s fault – you may know him – not mine. Anyway … My fault too. Can I ask you about Europe? It’s a big, big year ahead for Europeans of all stripes. You’re a pro-European minister. John Major said on the programme a couple of weeks ago that there was now a 50/50 chance of us leaving the EU and that we were heading towards the exit with this referendum. As a pro-European, what’s gone wrong?

KEN CLARKE:
Well I think we’ve had a rather silly debate about Europe over the last 6 months. In fact I think the political debate in this country over the last 6 months has been fairly disastrous. We’ve got to get back to serious issues for an election, as Susanna was just saying, and discuss properly the economy but also Europe. I mean in the modern world, we have a lot of problems to face. Membership of the European Union is essential if we’re to have a proper voice in world affairs and actually have some influence on things that really matter to British citizens. You know we do need to work with Germans, French, Poles and others to decide how to handle Mr Putin, how to make a European contribution to the Middle East crisis which is so dangerous to us all. And also our economy is very dependent on our having access to the biggest single market in the world in a globalised economy where we need a rebalanced economy. I mean we will diminish this country if we have a silly debate about Europe – which is, with great respect, largely what we’re having so far as the general public debate about Europe is concerned at the moment – and run the risk of pulling ourselves off into isolation of I don’t know what kind. I don’t know what influence people think Britain will have and influence matters because a government has got to influence great affairs in the modern world in order to be able to look after the interests of its citizens.

ANDREW MARR:
And yet you’re running out of time. There’s a poll in one of today’s papers saying a majority of people would vote now to leave the EU. Do you agree with Sir John that it is a 50/50 possibility?
KEN CLARKE:
There’s a real risk. Obviously we’ve got a strange air of protest around in the country and it’s time to have a serious debate. I agree with what Susanna said a moment ago about the remarkable debate they had in Scotland. And I’m not sure about the referendum and its outcome has created more uncertainty than it solved, but it was amazing campaigning in Scotland how the whole population was gripped with a serious debate on a big issue and all its subsidiary issues. Now we need that on Europe, but I mean if it’s conducted at the present level as to whether foreigners are really responsible for all our problems and couldn’t we solve our housing crisis and our low pay crisis just by throwing out all these European foreigners, we are likely to come to some rather bizarre conclusions. So …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Don’t … Sorry.

KEN CLARKE:
… pro-Europeans have got to organise themselves properly to get across the advantages of Europe and we’ve got to refute some of the sillier things that are being attributed to our presence in the European Union.

ANDREW MARR:
What about immigration? Don’t you think there has been an element in which as it were the Westminster elite has been smug and complacent about the effects of mass immigration on poorer societies and communities?

KEN CLARKE:
Well I don’t agree with that. I do think again we’ve got to get the immigration debate sorted out. It’s very difficult, the debate immigration, which is why I do agree the major parties have tended slightly to avoid it – because it runs away, it becomes almost hysterical quite rapidly in the public debate.

ANDREW MARR:
But why is that, do you think?
KEN CLARKE:
Our problem is illegal immigration. Our problem is that from dangerous, poor parts of the world, we have people coming in, and it’s very difficult to control them if they’re coming in on lorries from Somalia or Syria or Afghanistan or whatever. Legal immigration is a feature of the modern world, but everybody of course insists it must be controlled properly. Now what I don’t agree with you about is that the immigration we’ve had is somehow the cause of our housing crisis or our health crisis or whatever it happens to be. Evan far more complicated problems there that you’ve got to tackle. But what we do have to ensure is that we do have immigration because we have multi-national companies, because half a million of the immigrants here are running their own businesses and providing jobs. We don’t want to throw out French hedge fund managers …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Oh I don’t know.

KEN CLARKE:
… in a hurry for any particular reason. And at the moment the politics of the country – because of anger, because of reduced living standards, because of the recession – very susceptible to people telling them oh don’t bother with all this complicated politics; it’s foreigners, let’s get all these foreigners to go home. That is not a sensible immigration policy. Real immigration policy is very difficult. We’ve reduced immigration from outside the EU by about 50,000, but we have a long way to go – not least, as Theresa’s been trying to do, improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Home Office and the immigration service and so on.

ANDREW MARR:
It hasn’t made her terribly popular with David Cameron according to today’s papers. There seems to be a bit of a war going on there.

KEN CLARKE:
Well that’s one of these diary piece things. I mean I don’t explain, it’s quite entertaining and newsworthy, but somebody should stop all the entourage falling out with each other. I actually think the relations between the people themselves are very
good. I actually think Theresa’s one of the strongest ministers in the government. I actually think any prime minister – and David’s very sensible about this – accepts he wants some strong ministers at the top of his government.

ANDREW MARR:
And she’s certainly one of them.

KEN CLARKE:
The entourage seem to be having a little spat between themselves.

ANDREW MARR:
As a one nation Tory, do you look back on the Autumn Statement and those very, very big, drastic proposed cuts in non-protected departments and think that might have been a political mistake; you might have handed something to your enemies for the election?

KEN CLARKE:
It needs to be explained. I mean we are in a crisis still, we’re not out of it. You have to do tough and difficult things. You have to be honest you’re going to do tough and difficult things and explain it. And also put it in perspective. I mean all this stuff about the 1930s was laughable. George, if he delivers what he wants to deliver, will not get real levels of spending back to the levels that I had when I was Chancellor of the Exchequer. He’s taking it back just about to where Gordon Brown was once he’d given up sticking to my figures. That wasn’t poverty. It wasn’t a wasteland – the late 1990s. What you have to do is make sure that public spending doesn’t take too big a proportion of GDP …

ANDREW MARR:
Okay.

KEN CLARKE:
And getting down below 40 per cent of GDP, that isn’t the whole of economic policy. But unless you do that - unless you get a surplus at some stage, unless you control the total of debt, then the rest is going to be cancelled out.
ANDREW MARR:
Okay.

KEN CLARKE:
You cannot grow a state in which …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Sure.

KEN CLARKE:
... the economy if the state is taking too big a share. And you don’t have to ruin …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Everything. Alright.

KEN CLARKE:
… all the public services in order to do that.

ANDREW MARR:
Ken Clarke, for now thank you very much. We’ll talk more later on.

INTERVIEW ENDS