ANDREW MARR SHOW, MICHAEL GOVE

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ANDREW GOVE, MP
ENVIRONMENT SECRETARY

AM: Now in one of the many extraordinary moments in what has been a vintage political week of twist and turns. Three Cabinet ministers, Amber Rudd, Gregg Clark and David Gauke wrote a joint article in the Daily Mail in which they effectively warned Theresa May they would support a Commons veto against No Deal. It was a direct challenge to the authority of the Prime Minister of a kind I can't quite remember before and there are stories of up to 20 Tory ministers resigning their positions to vote on the same issue. That and the defection of the three Tory MPs raises real questions about the stability of the Tory family. Environment Secretary Michael Gove who was one of the leaders of the Brexit campaign who stayed loyal to Theresa May is with me now. Can I ask you first of all Michael Gove what your message is to Heidi Allen?

MG: Well Heidi is someone who I've admired during the time that she's been in the House of Commons. She's campaigned on social justice and welfare issues with passion and with effectiveness. I'm sorry that Heidi's left the Conservative Party. I hope that there will be a moment in the past where she can rejoin us. My admiration for her remains undimmed, even as I regret the decision that she's taken.

AM: Now one of the reasons those three Tory MPs left is that they believe that the Tory Party has been taken over by as it the hard line Brexiteer ERG group of MPs and that the Prime Minister is listening only to them.

MG: I don't think that's true at all. I think that the Conservative Party is an inclusive party which has MPs from a variety of different traditions and standpoints all of whom have views which we need to listen to and I think that while as I say I deeply regret Heidi's decision there are people who have a similar outlook,
similar world view to Heidi’s who are happily within the Conservative Party at the moment. And if I look at some of the things – and I hope that more people will join the Conservative Party as they see that we’re progressing forwarding a progressive agenda on a agenda on a number of issues. We’re spending a record amount on the NHS. On education we’ve managed to close the gap between rich and poor, to an extent that eluded the Blair government and of course my own area the environment, we’re taking

AM: We’ll come onto that in a moment.

MG: Of course and I think it’s important to stress that we’re in the progressive mainstream of British politics at the moment.

AM: Did you try and persuade Heidi Allen or any of the other Tories not to leave the Tory party?

MG: I didn’t.

AM: Why not?

MG: I didn’t know Heidi was going to make that decision. If I’d had the opportunity to do so I would have done so.

AM: David Cameron was able to text messages, but you weren’t the Prime Minister wasn’t, nobody inside the Tory party at the top of government seems to have tried to stop them leaving.

MG: Well I would have done everything I could to prevent Heidi and Anna and Sarah leaving and I deeply regret it. And in the past I’ve had conservations with Heidi and Sarah about a number of policy issues where I’ve sought always to make sure that we can work together and as I say my respect for her remains undimmed and I hope that she can be a Conservative again in the future.

AM: One of the other reasons that people have been unhappy with the Tory party is the sense that in local associations people who are not really Conservatives, they’re basically UKIP, have
been joining the party in recent days and weeks and then trying to deselect Tory MPs who are more moderate.

MG: Well there is no active de-selection process going on at the moment. There is a very dear friend of mine –

AM: Nick Boles.

MG: Nick Boles who is, how can one put this? There are tensions between him and some elements in this constituency party.

AM: He says he’s being bullied.

MG: There is no active de-selection process going on and again Nick is a friend of mine. A very close friend. We disagree on a number of questions not least on Europe but the critical thing is for the Conservative Party to be as successful in the future as it has been in the past there needs to be room for Nick in the same way as there needs to be room for Jacob Rees-Mogg and John Redwood. We need to have that range of voices and traditions so that we have a richer and deeper conversation about how we can make sure that this nation is stronger in the future.

AM: Well he clearly thinks that he is being bullied and has been very outspoken about that, he said that he’s not going to put up with it and people are trying to force him out. So from the perspective of individual MPs with their associations, it may not feel quite as comfortable and warm and cosy as you’re suggesting.

MG: I think there are - Look, Brexit and the aftermath has caused as you said right at the very beginning of this programme strains and tensions to be placed on friendships and relationships. But I think the right way through is to try to concentrate on bringing people together rather than dividing them after what has been a difficult period and in particular my message to people who voted leave in Nick’s constituency, like I did in my constituency is please respect this hard working and outstanding member of parliament and let’s concentrated on coming together. Because Nick also wants -

AM: In simple terms lay off is what you’re saying.
MG: I’m saying Nick has consistently voted for the Prime Minister and for the Prime Minister’s deal and I think that what we should seek to do in the days ahead is get behind the Prime Minister as she seeks to ensure that we can honour that referendum mandate and leave the European Union in an orderly way. But I think it’s also important to say that there is a difference between what’s been happening in the Labour Party which Tom Watson generously and movingly acknowledged, people like Luciana under immense pressure from people who are peddling racist and anti-Semitic thinking and what’s been happening in the Conservative Party. There’s a big difference.

AM: There’s been problems in the Conservative Party too, but let’s move on. You mentioned the next few days. Can I ask you do you think we’re going to see a meaningful vote in the House of Commons this week?

MG: I don’t know. I hope that we can get progress and I think the Prime Minister will be saying more about this later. The fact that she’s in Sharm el Sheikh talking to European leaders as part of a dialogue that they’re having with the Arab League is an opportunity for not just for the Prime Minister to put her shoulder to the wheel in trying to advance the peace process in the Middle East, it’s also critically an opportunity for her to talk to other European leaders in order to try to make further progress. I understand that progress is being made. The Attorney General, Geoffrey Cox and the Brexit Secretary, Stephen Barclay have had fruitful conversations with European colleagues.

AM: So when you say progress is being made there are only three possible ways of progress in this particular argument. One is in the words of Boris Johnson, to bin the backstop entirely which doesn’t seem likely, and one is to find a time limit to the backstop and one to find some kind of ejecter seat for Britain alone. Which of those is it going to be?
MG: I don’t know at this stage. I think it could be a time limit. I think could be unilateral exit mechanism.

AM: And that is still possible?

MG: I think these things are possible. And I think it could be, could be another legally powerful protocol or addition to the Treaty which makes it clear that we would not be bound in the backstop indefinitely against our will. Now again one of the things that has emerged through this whole negotiation process is that sometimes people say oh it’s impossible, you can’t square that circle. Earlier on in this process people said you won’t have a division of the four freedoms of the single market. But in fact the deal the Prime Minister brought back show that you can sometimes achieve things which other people have said are impossible.

AM: Time is running out nonetheless and three of your Cabinet colleagues have said if we don’t get a meaningful vote this week then they are going to support an extension of Article 50 so that Brexit is delayed beyond the end of March. Is that government policy?

MG: I’m not quite sure that is what they said but I do think that-

AM: It is pretty much what they said.

MG: Well I think different interpretations have been placed on it. But to fair to the three they’ve all outlined their concerns about a no deal outcome and I entirely understand their concerns. I don’t think no deal would be in our interests, but it’s also the case that if we don’t honour the decision of 17.4 million people to leave the European Union there will be big difficulties as well.

AM: I understand that.

MG: My intension is to ensure that in the days ahead as many people as possible can support the Prime Minister in her efforts to get a deal across the line.

AM: Let me read you what they actually said: ‘If we cannot achieve a parliamentary breakthrough in the next few days –
that’s this week - the country will face a choice. We could crash out on March 29th, or we could try and leave with a deal at a later date, if there is no breakthrough in the coming week the balance of opinion in parliament is clear that it would be better to seek to extend Article 50.’ Is that government policy?

MG: It’s an expression of their view.

AM: It’s not government policy is it?

MG: Our policy is to try to ensure – the first thing to say is

AM: This is really important. Is it government policy that Article 50 could be extended beyond the end of March?

MG: It is government policy to leave on the 29th of March and it is government policy to do everything we can to get there.

AM: In which case that is not government policy.

MG: The key thing is that when we’re facing the difficult choices that we have we can try to say ah ha, and heresy hunt and say you’re wrong here or you’re wrong there. I think that is counterproductive, I think it is alien to the temper of our times, I think the most important thing to do is when you have colleagues who express concerns - You mentioned earlier with respect to Heidi, it’s important in a civilised way to listen to those concerns and to seek to reconcile those concerns with the vital importance of making sure that we get a deal that can avert either no Brexit or no deal.

AM: Yet at this moment your own party at its local meetings has been passing motions saying that we will certainly leave the EU at the end of March this year. Prime Minister has said the same thing. There will be no flinching, there will be no changing and we have three Cabinet ministers supported by many other junior ministers saying no, we will extend Article 50. This is a really, really important moment. Why have they not been fired?

MG: Because they’re good colleagues and I think it would be again completely inappropriate given the nature of the conversation that the country is having about Brexit to try to strike macho postures when what we really need is unity. Now I recognise that Amber
and Greg and David have genuine concerns about a no deal outcome. So do I. And I think that the most important thing that we can do to ensure that we prevent that is to get behind the Prime Minister’s efforts to secure a good deal.

AM: So what about Tory MPs, possibly including them, who next week might vote for a motion to extend Article 50 to tie the government’s hands and extend Article 50 rather than no deal. Should they then resign from the government before doing that, or is it now acceptable?

MG: I think the motion that’s been put before us, the motion that Yvette Cooper has drafted and is backed by people like Oliver Letwin, I think is a mistake and I would urge colleagues not to vote for it. Because it’s not just about a potential extension of Article 50, it’s about taking power away from the government and who know where we might end up, we might up with a second referendu which would do real damage to our politics, but more than that all the Yvette Cooper Amendment does, as well as taking power away in this way is to seek – just a second is to seek to extend not to advance our effective movement towards a deal. So it is not an answer to the situation we face which is how can the House of Commons unite behind a deal?

AM: And yet, and yet many of our own colleagues take a diametrically opposite view and are planning to vote with that kind of Amendment next week. Should they resign from the government first, yes or no?

MG: Well I don’t think that they should vote for it.

AM: Should they resign from the government if they do?

MG: No, they should stay in the government and they should vote against Yvette’s amendment.

AM: If they’re allowed to.

MG: But no they should stay in the government and vote against Yvette’s Amendment Andrew, in order to ensure –
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AM: Well you’d like them to do that but they could vote other ways. I just remember Theresa May very vividly after the Chequers Agreement saying, collective responsibility has now been re-imposed, we have collective Cabinet responsibility. No you don’t, you’re all over the place. You are.

MG: No. I think that we had a conversation earlier with Luciana and Heidi and they made the point that you can look at politics through the prism of the 20th century or you can recognise that we’re in a different realm now. I served in the Cabinet, a coalition government, the first for decades, that was different and new politics and I think it was a broadly successful government. Collective responsibility was suspended during the referendum campaign. I was on a different side from good friends of mine like Amber. Again it was a unique set of circumstances. We’re in a unique set of circumstances now and one can apply the sort of virility tests that used to be applied in the past, or we can seek to make progress by being open to arguments from different parts of the party but also reminding everyone in our party and particularly in parliament, that we’ve got to honour that referendum mandate. And parliament was clear that if we can secure changes to the backstop which the Prime Minister is battling for at the moment, then there is a solid majority that can be marshalled behind an orderly Brexit which both honours the referendum mandate and at the same time makes sure that our economy will be stronger.

AM: You spoke a moment ago about no deal. If there is no deal will food prices in this country go up?

MG: I think there is a risk of that, yes.

AM: Because we’ve looked at the WTO tariffs that would be applied in those circumstances and the British Retail Consortium, basically the nation’s shopkeepers have applied those to a range of foodstuffs – I’ve got a graphic here which shows some of them. There we go, beef up to 30% more expensive, tomatoes 18%, 9 to 18% more expensive. Cheddar cheese up to 32% more
expensive in those circumstances. Now are they just experts or is that a realistic prospect if there is no deal?

NG: It is one scenario, but it is not the scenario that we plan to go down. One of the things that we can do once we leave the European Union is that we can set tariffs at a level that we believe is appropriate, both to protect the consumer, but also to look after the most vulnerable and important sectors of food production at home. That is a premise with a particularly high level of tariffs. Those which the EU applies of course to goods from outside.

AM: But it could happen?
MG: No, I don’t think it will. Not under this government, no. It is a scenario using one particular model but this government is not going down that route and therefore the figures mentioned would not apply. However, however I think it’s important to recognise that the friction that would follow leaving without a deal would impose additional costs on food production here. That is why it is so important that we secure a deal. Because if we do secure a deal then we’re going to get the benefits of a tariff and quota free access to the European Union and also the benefits of being able to important food from other(countries) which we don’t grow here which at the moment is subject to tariffs which we could lower. It’s a win win.

AM: Well you have to said to farmers that in the choice that you have to make between protecting farmers, upland sheep farmers and so forth and protecting consumers, you are taking the farmer’s side, you’re taking the producer’s side and tariffs will be announced tomorrow
MG: Well, I think it’s – the first thing is I’m not taking anyone’s side other than the British people’s side.

AM: No, you’re taking the farmer’s side against consumers.
MG: No. Because I think it’s vitally important that we have a system of tariffs that both allows us to maintain as far as possible price stability, but also to protect vulnerable areas of production. I don’t think anyone would thank us, Andrew, if we saw sheep farmers going out of business. It would be bad for the environment and it would bad for the solidity of our food security in the future. So it is a balanced approach.

AM: But the logic of that is that there will be higher prices for consumers. When was that ever discussed during the referendum campaign?

MG: Well, I think you’re mixing up two things. The first thing is we’re talking about what might happen in the event of no deal. During the referendum campaign we were always arguing for a deal. The second thing is that these would be temporary measures in the event of no deal in order to ensure both price stability and stability of supply. We could then move in the aftermath of this process to a new trading relationship, both with Europe and with others.

AM: When during the referendum campaign – because I’ve been doing my homework and I’ve been trying to discover examples – when did you or anybody else ever warn us that we might be leaving with no deal?

MG: Well, I argued for a deal during the referendum campaign.

AM: Yeah, but you never warned us that we might not get one.

MG: Well, the critical thing there is that there are some people who say that the referendum vote was a mandate for no deal. And I think you’re absolutely right, what it was a mandate for was to leave and to lead us into a better deal.

AM: So you didn’t warn us. We are new territory that nobody was told about at the time of the referendum. Let’s remind ourselves what you said at that time.
MG: [QUOTE] What we’ve heard from the remain campaign throughout this whole referendum have been dire warnings of the terrible consequences of the British people just taking control of our own destiny. And the truth is that if we vote to leave we’ll be in an economically stronger position.

AM: We’ll be in an economically stronger position?
MG: Yes.
Am: If we look at the government’s own figures, either for Theresa May’s managed deal or for a no deal situation, the amount of growth that we will lose is between three and nearly ten per cent. That is an economically much worse position to be in.
MG: We’ve had this discussion before. That is a forecast which combines –
AM: From the British government.
MG: No, no, no, no.
AM: Which you’re a member?
MG: Yes, indeed, but it’s a forecast which ignores a variety of different steps that we could take in order to strengthen our economy. We both know that economic forecasts are a useful tool, but they’re not absolute predictions, and there are a variety of things we can do outside the European Union to strengthen our economic position and indeed to improve our environment and to invest in the NHS. The key thing is that, as was the case during the referendum campaign, we have choices over our future and people in parliament have a choice as well. If people in parliament vote for the Prime Minister’s approach, if we secure a good deal, then we can have, as I mentioned earlier, the opportunity not just to have a strong commercial and security relationship with Europe, we have the opportunity democratically to take control of the levers that can drive growth and prosperity.
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AM: Day by day we are slipping towards no deal. Given the prospect that you and others gave during the referendum campaign, it now looks to a lot of people as if you have sold us a pup.

MG: No, I think the critical thing about the referendum campaign is that we argued in the referendum campaign that we should get a deal with Europe. That should be the aim. In government that’s what I’ve been arguing for and seeking to persuade all of my colleagues of the virtues of.

AM: Alright, just going back to what we were talking about earlier on, to be absolutely clear, in your view it is possible for ministers to vote for the Yvette Cooper Boles amendment and stay in government afterwards?

MG: No. I said clearly that I want people to vote against Yvette’s amendment and to stay in government, and I will do everything –

AM: If they vote the other way can they stay in government?

MG: I will do everything I can in order to persuade my colleagues who I admire very much to stay –

AM: If they vote for Yvette Cooper’s amendment can they stay in government?

MG: I will do everything I can between now and Wednesday to persuade all of my colleagues – there’ll be a chance to vote on Wednesday, there’ll be a prime ministerial statement on Tuesday. I think we’ll show progress, and I think, for that reason, friends of mine like Amber and Greg and David will be supporting the Prime Minister as energetically in the future as they have to brilliantly in the past.

(ends)