

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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LIZ TRUSS

(Please check against delivery (uncorrected copies))

AM: Now, the Trade Secretary Liz Truss has been listening to that with me in the studio. Liz Truss, a stench hanging over the government.

LT: Well, I completely disagree with that analysis. The fact is that the prime minister has been 100 per cent focused on dealing with the covid crisis, the vaccine rollout, which is very successful, we've got 50 per cent of all adults, all people in Britain now vaccinated, and of course rebuilding the economy after covid.

AM: Have you seen the refurbished Number 10 flat?

LT: No, I haven't. I've never been in the Number 10 flat, in fact, Andrew.

AM: So you don't whether the 'John Lewis nightmare' has been god rid of. A lot of people, including myself, see John Lewis as rather aspirational.

LT: Well, I think John Lewis is a brilliant shop in fact. But I haven't seen the Number 10 flat in any of its guises.

AM: The prime minister gets an allowance of £30,000 from the taxpayer to refurbish his flat. Do you know how much he spent on it?

LT: No I don't. But I do know that the spending has been covered by him personally.

AM: If he spent more than £30,000, should that come from his own pocket?

LT: It has come from his own pocket, Andrew.

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AM: And so why do you think Dominic Johnson (sic) said that the prime minister had plans to have donors secretly paying for the renovation?

LT: Well, my understanding is the costs have been covered by the prime minister and everything is being fully declared in line with the rules.

AM: Did a Tory Party donor lend him the money beforehand?

LT: As I said, he is covering the costs and it's been complied with fully -

AM: The question is did a donor provide the money beforehand?

LT: Andrew, I am spending my time in intense trade negotiations, getting a good deal for the United Kingdom, I'm not spending my time thinking about the Downing Street flat refurbishment. What I know -

AM: You're speaking for the government -

LT: What I know is the prime minister has personally met the costs of the flat refurbishment. And that is what people in Britain want to know.

AM: So you can't tell me whether or not he borrowed money from a Conservative Party donor to do this?

LT: What I can tell you is he has personally met the costs.

AM: Okay, you can't.

LT: And that everything will be declared as it ought to be in the proper way.

AM: I mean, the reason I'm asking about this is that there are clear tax implications about what I'm asking. If the prime minister had undeclared money from a Conservative Party donor, even if he's paid it back now, for the renovation of the flat, do you agree with Dominic Cummings that this would be unethical and possibly illegal?

LT: Well, what I agree is that the prime minister has met the costs, that everything will be declared in line - including for tax purposes. And that's the reassurance the British public want.

AM: Surely you need to know the answer to the basic questions: did he borrow the money and how much did he spend and those kind of things?

LT: What I need to know - what I need to know, Andrew, is that it is being properly declared and the prime minister has personally met those costs. I'm not getting involved, as you can appreciate, as Trade Secretary, in the details of flat renovations.

AM: We're supposed to get a register of every minister's interests published every half year, every six months or so. It's very late. You heard Angela Rayner saying publish it, publish it now, why don't you?

LT: I'm sure it will be published.

AM: You could go back after this programme, literally press the send button and publish it. Why not?

LT: As I say, I'm sure it will be published in line with the rules.

AM: We haven't had it since July 2020. That's not in line with the rules. It should have been published by now. I'm just wondering have you any idea why it's not been published?

LT: No, I haven't. But what I can tell you is everybody in the government is fully focused on dealing with this appalling pandemic, making sure our vaccine rollout programme is happening, making sure we recover the economy after covid. And as I said, everything will be properly declared. The prime minister personally met the costs of the flat. But I think we need to recognise that the prime minister's time is rightly focused on dealing with this pandemic, and that is exactly what the British public expect.

AM: So what would it say about the prime minister's priorities if it turned out that he had been phoning newspaper editors to brief against Dominic Cummings?

LT: Well, I...

AM: This prime minister who's focused on all the real stuff?

LT: I can't comment on what newspaper editors and what conversations go on. What I can tell you is all of my engagement with the prime minister, he is focused on the issues the country is facing and dealing with them.

AM: Except when he isn't?

LT: Well, he is. I mean, he works incredibly hard. It's been an incredibly challenging time, but if you look at how the UK is doing in terms of our economic recovery, in terms of our vaccine programme, we are doing well. We're not complacent, of course we need to do more, but this is what the focus is of the prime minister and the other ministers across the government.

AM: You mentioned the pandemic. Six months ago somebody leaked the government's plans for the November lockdown. Is the inquiry into that leak still going on?

LT: It is, yes.

AM: Do you know when we're going to see the answers of it?

LT: I don't. No.

AM: You know, I can't quite believe I'm asking this, this is a surreal moment: is it possible that the prime minister wanted that inquiry to be stopped because he was fearful that the outcome would offend his girlfriend?

LT: I think this is a complete load of Westminster tittle-tattle that people simply don't care about. The fact is the inquiry is ongoing. This is being looked into, but fundamentally what is -

AM: People care about the handling of the lockdown, I think, very much indeed.

LT: Absolutely. Which is why, as a government, we're focusing on making sure we come out of lockdown in the right way, making sure the public's protected, making sure that the vaccine programme is rolled out. Not this stream of allegations about personnel issues.

AM: You say stream of allegations and tittle-tattle and so forth, but this is coming from a man who was very, very close to the prime minister through all the crucial period, through the election and afterwards, and before that. Dominic Cummings says of the prime minister, 'it is sad to see the prime minister and his office fall so far below the standards of competence and integrity the country deserves.' What do you say to Dominic Cummings?

LT: What I'd say is that the prime minister is doing an excellent job. He is delivering on recovering the economy from coronavirus, dealing with this disease, rolling out the vaccine programme. And I encourage the prime minister to carry on with that rather than listening to these noises off that we're hearing.

AM: The prime minister has said that he would publish all the texts and all the relevant messages between himself and James Dyson; he said that several times and we still haven't seen them. When are we going to see those messages?

LT: I don't know, but I'm sure if he says they will be published they will be published.

AM: But you don't know. Alright, let's turn to the trade deal that we've been talking about. Can you promise people watching this programme that they will not have hormone-treated beef in their shops?

LT: I can. I can absolutely promise that we're not going to lower our excellent food standards in order to do this trade deal. But what we will do through this trade deal is make sure we get fantastic British products into Australia at a much cheaper price - so whether it's whisky or cars - which will help drive jobs and

growth across Britain. And it also gives us access to fantastic fast-growing part of the world, the Asia-Pacific. We're expecting 66 per cent of the world's middle classes to be there by 2030. So this is all about creating jobs and growth for the future and hitching Britain to the fastest-growing parts of the world.

AM: This could increase our exports to Australia by 900 million, which sounds a great deal. But it's 4.2 billion the other way. In other words, this is a great deal for Australia. It's harder to see that it's a great deal for Britain. They're doing five times better out of it than we are.

LT: Well, these are simply static analysis. Of course what we need to do is encourage more British business to export. Currently only one in ten British companies export; I want to get more of them doing that, so you know, it's not a fixed prediction. We can change the way we do things. But actually bringing products in from Australia at more affordable prices is great for British consumers, whether it's wine or other Australian products. So I don't accept it's a kind of zero sum game here.

AM: Let's talk about other Australian products, and indeed standards there, because there is apparently a process known as 'mulesing' which involves cutting the skin off the buttocks of live sheep and docking of tails as part of the way that they are treated there. It wouldn't be allowed in Britain, and have you persuaded the Australians to stop that practise before the export us their mutton?

LT: Well, Australia do have good animal welfare practises as we do in the United Kingdom, and of course I will be saying more about that when we come to announcing the agreement in principle.

AM: Well, mulesing is allowed in Australia but it's not allowed in Britain. Tail docking, the way they do it, is not allowed in Britain,

and British sheep farmers will be looking at this and thinking this is simply unfair to us. And not good animal..

LT: I've been very clear in all of our trade deals that our farmers, with their high animal welfare standards, we won't allow them to be undermined by unfair competition. I'm very clear about that. But there are other areas, Andrew, such as the banning of foie gras, that the Australians have already done that haven't been yet in the United Kingdom. So of course we need to work with partners like Australia to improve animal welfare standards across the board.

AM: I'm still really interested in how good this deal is for British farmers. Your own department have produced an analysis saying that for agriculture and the semi-processed food sectors are estimated to see a fall in output and employment in Britain. So why are you signing a deal that will result in fewer jobs in Britain?

LT: Well, in terms of agriculture - in terms of agriculture and farming there is a benefit from the deal. I accept the point about the semi-processed food sector.

AM: So there are going to be jobs lost there. Can I -

LT: Maybe not. Just to explain the way these economic analyses work is they're static analyses, they're not predictions of the future.

AM: It's the only analysis we have.

LT: And at the moment - at the moment only one in five food producers export. What I want to do is help change the culture so we get more of our fantastic food and drink out there in the rest of the world. And the benefits of this deal, a product like Scotch whisky, which currently faces a tariff, the tariffs will be removed; products like cars, the tariffs will be removed; and there'll be huge opportunities for industries like financial services, professional services. And I believe we can compete. I think it's very defeatist to say that we're not going to be able to compete.

AM: I'm only reading you what your own department...

LT: This is static analysis, what the world is now - the world in 2030 will be different.

AM: Well, the world is always changing in bad ways as well as good ways.

LT: That's rather pessimistic.

AM: Wait till you hear what I'm going to say. I'm talking about the pandemic in India, which is absolutely appalling at the moment. Is there anything the British government can do to help? I mean, there's a big shortage of oxygen for instance. Can we help them in any practical way at all?

LT: Well, I completely agree with you that the situation in India is terrible. And in fact I was on the phone to my Indian counterpart last week offering the UK's support. We are looking at what we can do in areas like oxygen. We're putting together a package to try and help the Indian government and the Indian population. It is a very, very serious situation.

AM: Finally, going back to the story of the day, as it were, the prime minister's involvement and Dominic Cummings and all of that, is the government going to put up a senior minister to talk to MPs directly about this tomorrow?

LT: Well, I'm sure if a urgent question is allowed a minister will be put up to answer that urgent question. But as I've said, I think the situation is very clear, that the prime minister has acted in line with the rules.

AM: Liz Truss, thanks very much indeed for coming in and talking to us today.

(ends)