ANDREW MARR SHOW, 25TH NOVEMBER, 2018

JEREMY HUNT, MP
Foreign Secretary

AM: Before we get onto the very important matter of Brexit, let me ask you about two British citizens. Mr Hedges to start with. You seem to be very, very angry about what the UAE did, as if you were personally betrayed by them.

JH: Well we were very shocked and I've met Daniella, his wife who is being incredibly brave in very challenging circumstances. I am more optimistic as we sit here now that we can find a way through this. The UAE is a very longstanding friend of the UK and I've had very good conversations with their Foreign Minister and I'm going to speak to him again this afternoon. So I'm very much hoping we can find a way through that.

AM: Let me ask you then about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe who's in prison in Tehran in Iran. Has been there for a long time now. This goes back to 2016. Your predecessor, Boris Johnson, we heavily criticised for his role over this. Is there any grounds for optimism there?

JH: Well I think that's more challenging. I was in Tehran on Monday and I asked to meet Nazanin. I wasn't allowed to. But I did get to meet her daughter. In fact she gave me a present from Nazanin which is this dolly that Nazanin made for my own daughter who's also four years old, which was particularly difficult for Nazanin to make because she's now got numbness in her shoulder and in her hands.

AM: She made that before that happened.

JH: She made it – no I think she made it when it happened and she also - the daughter also did a picture of me with my four year
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old and her four year old and she's put me in a bow-tie. Probably thinks I’m a Tory toff. Nothing escapes a four year old.

AM: What are you doing to do about it though? I mean this is a very proud, prickly and difficult regime to deal with. They have been pretty icy about this so far. How are you going to shift things?

JH: Well, I had two messages and I spent a long time talking about Nazanin and the first thing to say is that it’s not just Nazanin. Nazanin has an incredibly brave husband, Richard Ratcliffe, who’s decided to go public. But in most cases the Iranians say if you go public the conditions in prison will be worse for your loved one. He ignored that.

AM: Straight forward bullying threat.

JH: And the truth is that there are other British citizens in the same situation as Nazanin and there are other citizens from other countries. And my message to Iran was twofold. First of all get the medical treatment to Nazanin that she needs. It’s very, very important. And there’s one other citizen who’s name I’m not at liberty to disclose who also needs urgent medical treatment. Get him his medical treatment. And number two. Iran is one of the great civilisations of the Middle East, it wants to be a great regional power. If they want respect then do not start locking up innocent people as a tool of diplomatic leverage. It is totally and utterly unacceptable.

AM: Do you think they’re listening to you?

JH: I think they’re listening. Whether they’re going to do anything is different matter. But Richard Ratcliffe, this time of year, every year he launches a campaign to get Nazanin home for her birthday, which is the 26th of December and I know we all want to support that campaign, but if she could come home wouldn’t that
be the best Christmas present, not just for her but for the whole country.

AM: Let’s turn to Brexit, if we could. Will this deal make us better off than where we are now?

JH: Well I think the truth is there are compromises in this deal, but my colleagues in the House of Commons will be looking at this and they will say that we have got between 70 and 80% of what we want and the question is can this be a staging post to get a 100% of what we want, particularly being an independent trading nation, a sovereign British ploughing our furrow in the world.

AM: I’m thinking specifically, I’m sorry, of will we be financially economically better off as a result of this deal as compared to staying inside the EU?

JH: Well I think there’s a huge debate about the economic impact of Brexit. This deal, as it stands, mitigates most of the negative impacts. However –

AM: So mitigate most of the negative, that means you think we will not be better off.

JH: Well I think we will not be significantly worse off or better off, but what it does mean is that we get our independence back. We get our sovereignty back, we get control of our borders. We’re not making annual payments. But the question –

AM: I’m sorry to interrupt. The government modelled various different outcomes including leaving under WTO rules which would reduce the size of the economy by 7.8% in terms of the growth that we would lose over 15 years, but didn’t do that for Mrs May’s deal and we were promised that once we knew the deal, what the deal was and it’s now been signed off so we all do know that deal, the government would publish its modelling of what that would mean for us economically. Is that now going to happen?
JH: Yes it is, and we will explain those figures. But what people will see is that this deal has a range of potential outcomes, because we haven't negotiated the future trading relationship in its entirety. But the point for my colleagues is that if we turn this deal down it is not automatically the case that the Europeans will agree to negotiate a better deal. In fact we heard Laura Kuenssberg this morning saying that they are now being absolutely catagoric that they won't. And you've got people like Tony Blair who you were talking to earlier who is waiting to say if parliament turns this down look, the politicians can't agree, let's give it back to the people to decide, and that sounds very democratic, of course it would in fact be profoundly undemocratic for the reasons that you challenged him on, because the people have made their decision once and they don't want to go back and keep being asked the same thing over and over again.

AM: What is a Turkey Trap?
JH: Well I’m not going to go into my - what I discussed in Cabinet because those are confidential discussions.

AM: You recognise the phrase or you wouldn’t have said it.
JH: Well, one of the things that wasn’t leaked was what I said at the start of that Cabinet discussion and I said that all of us around the Cabinet table need to recognise that Theresa May’s job right now is perhaps one of the most difficult jobs of any Prime Minister or President in the western world, and whatever our internal discussions we owe her our loyalty. And I think that is important and I think that's what the country wants as well.

AM: The reason I would suggest that Turkey trap is an important phrase that we should remember, it doesn't refer to Christmas, it refers to the country, is it’s the state of being in a customs arrangement with the EU out of which you can’t get by yourself in either direction. In other words, your hands are tied, you’re inside
this agreement until the EU wants you out again. And this is a very, very difficult submissive position for a country to be in and that is why an awful lot of your colleagues can’t swallow this deal.

JH: Well that’s why a lot of people are uncomfortable with the backstop. Indeed Theresa May herself has said she’s uncomfortable with some elements of the backstop, but the question we have to ask is can this be a springboard through with we become an independent sovereign power, negotiating our own trade deals? I think there is a degree of comfort in the wording in the political declaration which states that as the end point. Now that’s only a political declaration. However, it is also effectively the negotiating mandate for the next stage of discussions. And we know in the EU’s case that that is very important because they tend to stick to their mandate. But what I would say is, we can get there, there will be very tough negotiations but it’s possible, but there are also very big risks on the other side if this deal is rejected – as to what would happen.

AM: I’ll come onto those risks in just a second. How many Tory MPs do you think will vote against this?

JH: Well that’s a very difficult question and the arithmetic at the moment is looking challenging, but a lot can change over the next two weeks. But I think what all of my colleague will be doing is thinking what is in the national interest, and they’ll also be talking to our their constituents. And when I talk to my constituents there’s a lot of people – a friend of mine described them as BOBs. That’s not Roberts, that’s people who are bored of Brexit. They want us to get on with it and deliver Brexit.

AM: A useful phrase.

JH: There are also people who are not bored of Brexit, who are passionate about the details, who like me have run their own
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business and what they say is if you have a deal that gives you most of what you wanted, not all of it, you take it and then you try at the next stage negotiate the other bits that you couldn’t get and I think the thing people wouldn’t forgive us for, if I could just make this point Andrew, is if we got to the 30th of March next year and we hadn’t left the EU or we hadn’t put ourselves on a course to end free movement of people, which is the thing that mattered to most people, and so that’s the uncertainty that we’d be risking.

AM: Theresa May has said there are three options. My deal, leaving without a deal, or not having any kind of Brexit at all. That third option, no Brexit at all: how could we get to a situation in which we didn’t actually leave? I don’t understand what she meant by that.

JH: Well, because you heard Tony Blair on the programme earlier making his case for a second referendum and he would immediately say any kind of gridlock –
AM: Parliament means –
JH: No, no, but he would say any kind of gridlock – he gave – he told you what the logic was for a second referendum.

AM: So when she says that we might not get Brexit out of this, what she is saying is that if my deal is voted down the political chaos resulting from that might mean there will be a second referendum.

JH: Well, what she’s saying is that there would be a huge degree of uncertainty. And the truth is no one really knows. There is one option which I know some of my colleagues are hoping for and Arlene Foster speaking very powerfully this morning was saying which is go to back and get a better deal perhaps which doesn’t have the backstop, but there are other options that people will be pushing very hard for. And there’s one thing that Tony Blair said
which I just want to use this chance if I could just to counter because I think it was profoundly wrong. He said that only a second referendum would give social stability. Just imagine what happened if we had a second referendum and as he hopes the result was reversed. You would then have 48% of the country that had voted to leave twice and they would be incredibly angry. That wouldn’t be social stability. And in truth social stability involves leaving but also having friendly trading relationships with the EU and that’s what Theresa May is trying to achieve.

AM: Let’s flip to the alternative which is a no deal Brexit. If MPs vote down this deal, is it inevitable that we go to a no deal Brexit?

JH: It’s not inevitable but the way the law is is that legally we will leave the EU on the 29th of March and there would need to be another Act of Parliament or an amendment to an Act of Parliament to change that.

AM: You’re an experienced parliamentarian. A motion by the House of Commons doesn’t end no deal, does it?
JH: No, it doesn’t.
AM: And so therefore if this is voted down the government’s policy is that we’re heading towards no deal even though you say that will be catastrophic and chaotic?

JH: It would be the case that that would be the option if parliament did not change any Acts of Parliament.
AM: Aren’t you just holding a gun to the heads of the British people saying this deal or else we pull the trigger and we have absolute chaos?
JH: No, far from that. What we’re actually saying is that if there was gridlock in parliament there would be a huge degree of uncertainty and what the British people want is they want us to get on and deliver Brexit. And let’s remember in this deal that
although there are things that – there are lots of things that any of us can point to that we don’t like, there’s also a huge amount that we’ve achieved. Not just the ending of free movement of people. The ending of large annual payments, coming out of the Common Fisheries Policy, the Common Agricultural Policy. Largely ending the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. So it gets us a lot of what we wanted. Not everything. But the question is can this be that staging post that gets us to the point where we could get everything? And I think with a lot of hard work it can be.

AM: Amber Rudd says that the House of Commons can prevent there being no deal.

JH: Well there are circumstances that probably in order to do that if it was a Conservative government the House of Commons would have to bring down a Conservative government. So what you see is that if there was this gridlock you’d have some people wanting a better Brexit deal, you’d have some people wanting a second referendum, you’ve have Jeremy Corbyn wanting a Labour government, all of this would be huge uncertainty.

AM: In this incredibly complicated uncertain situation is it possible the government simply collapses?
JH: It’s not possible to rule out anything and that’s why all of us what we’ll have to do –
AM: It is possible. The collapse of the government is possible at this stage?
JH: What all of us have to do is to say what do our constituents actually want in this situation and we have to work out what’s in the national interest and it’s all about the balance of risks. Because this isn’t a perfect deal for everyone but it does have a lot of what everyone wants and the question is whether we can use it to get everything we want and that will be difficult but it’s not impossible.
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AM: One of the reasons lots of people are very suspicious of this deal is a phrase used by Jeremy Corbyn which is accurate. He called it ‘A blind Brexit’ and a blind Brexit, when you look at the vagueness of the political declaration is absolutely fair.

JH: Well that is absolute nonsense, but I mean he is Leader of the Opposition and he can say what he wants. But the truth is that — AM: I’m not sure it is nonsense, can I just challenge you on that. Because Theresa May said it would be very, very detailed. The Chairman of you party came on this programme, sat in that chair and said it would be a very, very specific and detailed agreement in the end. And when you look at something that trade in goods absolutely central to all of us this. What the political declaration says, ‘the parties envisage having a trading relationship on goods that is as close as possible.’ What does that mean?

JH: Well, it says -
AM: It means nothing.
JH: There are some bits of course that are to be negotiated, but there are other things that are very clear. No tariffs. No quantities of limits on the amount of goods that are exported and imported. Becoming an independent coastal state and negotiating access our waters in a way that Iceland and Norway does. These are very concrete details.

AM: These are left to the future. These things are left to the future and again on border checks –
JH: No, Andrew I need to correct you. The things I’ve just talked about are not left for the future. It’s agreed that we will not have tariffs.
AM: Fishing, there’s still a lot to talk about.
JH: It’s agreed that we will not have limits on the amount of goods that are exported or imported. There’s a lot of detail in there. But it is a mandate for negotiations.

AM: That very alluring phrase, frictionless trade which was in the Chequers agreement which you signed up to has vanished.

JH: Well, frictionless trade is possible in that agreement but what the agreement says is the degree to which trade is –

AM: It’s possible but it’s not there.

JH: The degree to which trade is frictionless will depend on the amount of level playing field terms and conditions that we agree to and that would be the case in any trade –

AM: Border checks. Very important to people. ‘The parties envisage a spectrum of different outcomes.’ That literally means anything might happen.

JH: Because this is a trade deal that we will negotiate, but this is the key point Andrew.

AM: It’s so vague.

JH: Andrew, this is the key point. That legally we can only negotiate a trade deal once we have left the EU. Now the Withdrawal Agreement which is a legally binding document means that we can leave the EU on the 29th of March, restore control of our borders, stop big annual payments, largely remove the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and then we can negotiate the trade deal which gets us, with a lot of hard work, all the things that we want.

AM: If we end up in the backstop, and as you say this is all legal so we might very well end up in the backstop and be unable to stop that happening, we have no independent way out of that, do we?

JH: That is why a lot of people are uncomfortable with the backstop. But also look at what that political declaration says. Not in vague terms but very, very clearly, that Britain will be an
independent trading nation. And so there it is in black and white. That is the intention of the EU and that is our intention of course as well.

AM: If Theresa May loses this absolutely crucial vote on which she has staked her entire premiership in the House of Commons can she stay on as Prime Minister?

JH: Well, absolutely she can.
AM: Really?
JH: And I don’t think in a day when she is in Brussels battling for Britain with 27 other European leaders we should be making her position weaker by speculating about her future and I think people have underestimated her in the past a lot.

AM: Final, final question. It has been suggested that if MPs reject this deal it could be brought back to the House of Commons later, perhaps after a collapse in the markets and a general sense of national crisis. Will MPs get more than one chance to vote on the Withdrawal Agreement or is this it?

JH: Well, we don’t know the answer to that question but what I would say is this —
AM: It could come back a second time.
JH: - but what I would say is instead of all this looking into the abyss I think we also need to have a little bit of self confidence and optimism. We have been in situations far, far more challenging than this as a country. We’re going to get through this, we’re going to get to the other side, give people the Brexit they voted for and help people to feel proud in the great country that we are.

Ends