

ANDRE MARR SHOW, MATHEW HANCOCK, MP

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MATTHEW HANCOCK, MP

HEALTH SECRETARY

AM: Listening to that is Matt Hancock, the Health and Social Care Secretary. Well there you are Matt Hancock, he has basically blown out the Prime Minister's strategy for the next week.

MH: Not at all. If you listen to what the Irish are saying they're looking for pragmatic solutions, and after all –

AM: And he's saying we're not going to move on the backstop and the Withdrawal Agreement. If they don't move on the backstop and the Withdrawal Agreement, Ireland, and the rest of the UK then the Theresa May deal has zilch chance of getting through the House of Commons. We both know that.

MH: Well, that's a negotiating position that the Irish are taking, but I think it's also extremely clear from that interview and from the tone of the interview which is similar to the tone of discussions I've had is that Ireland doesn't want to be a no deal Brexit, in fact the whole purpose of the backstop is to avoid a hard border which risks being a consequence of a no deal Brexit. So the idea that the European Union and the Irish government would drive this process to a no deal exit in order to try to achieve something which is intended to avoid a no deal Brexit, that is not going to happen. We do need to – we need to firstly assess what's going to get a majority in the Commons and then we need to take it to the EU and explain that that is the way to have the sort of strong positive relationship that Simon was just talking about.

AM: Okay, and in terms of what's going on in the Commons there's motions going down for next week which say that in explicit terms the Withdrawal Agreement should have the backstop stripped out of it and there should be alternative ways of finding a solution to the Irish border. Would you back that proposal?

MH: Well I think that we have got to listen very carefully to people who are willing to vote for the deal, subject to some amendments. And I think that we need to build that majority in the Commons clearly and this was one of the proposals that's coming from a wide range of people who want to get a deal through and have that in future relations...

AM: In your view it's helpful to the Prime Minister going back to Brussels to have the backstop removed from the Withdrawal Agreement and the Commons explicitly saying that must happen. That helps the Prime Minister?

MH: Well whether it's that exact one we don't know which amendments the Speaker will select and so we don't know exactly the shape of the debate on Tuesday but I do understand the impulse behind those who are laying that amendment, and in particular the work that's been going on to try to bring people together. You know, I was listening to Yvette Cooper earlier in the programme -

AM: Ah, I was going to ask you about her. Do you agree with her amendment?

MH: No, because delaying Brexit won't help solve these problems. You heard that emphatically from the Irish government as well as from us. We've been debating these issues for a couple of years now. Now we need to find a resolution. And the thing I'd say in response to - just let me finish - the thing I'd say in response to Yvette and all those who feel so strongly against having a no deal exit and I don't want a no deal exit, emphatically not, thing I'd say to them is you can't just vote for delay, that doesn't solve anything, you've got to vote positively for a deal. So let's keep having those conversations around what the Commons can coalesce around. And people who get cross with me about the fact that no deal is the outcome that will happen if nothing else is agreed on, if you don't like that it is incumbent on you to vote for the deal that's on the table.

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AM: You've mentioned no deal. Can you clear up what you said to the Cabinet in November when you said you couldn't guarantee that people wouldn't die – patients in hospitals wouldn't die if there was no deal. Why do you say that?

MH: Well I didn't quite say that.

AM: Just tell us what you did say.

MH: Well Cabinet discussions are meant to be secret, Andrew.

AM: This one's leaked, so you might as well tell us.

MH: Why don't I tell you exactly what the position is. As Health Secretary I feel very responsible for making sure that people can have unhindered access to medicines. It's incredibly important. Now if everybody does what they need to do, then I'm confident that that can continue and the pharmaceutical industry, who are responsible for building the stockpiles in case there's delays at the border, they have reacted so far in an exemplary manner and they are doing everything at the moment that needs to be done.

AM: So people's lives are threatened by no deal at the moment?

MH: Well I think that so long as everybody does what they need to do. Now these things are always difficult, there are always from time to time shortages, we have to make sure that we put in place what's necessary.

AM: A lot to talk about. Can I ask you, is it the case the government is looking at the possibility of martial law and curfews if there is no deal?

MH: Well I wouldn't put a stress on that. Of course government all the time looks at all of the options in all circumstances. You know we in the Health Department do –

AM: So that you are looking at martial law as a possibility?

MH: Not specifically, no.

AM; Not specifically but it's there as a possibility?

MH; Well it remains on the statute book, but it isn't the focus of our attention, no.

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AM: Let's turn to another very, very serious story today, the tragic case of Molly Russell. You have to the internet company involved in sending her – even after she's died – messages of self-harm and terrible suggestions and so on. You've written a letter but can you really change their mind by writing a letter to these companies?

MH: Oh yes and we must. I mean I feel so strongly about this, that the parents reading that interview today will have been shocked and fearful about the impact that this technology can have. I'm an enthusiast for technology, but we've got to make sure that the risks are mitigated and we can act.

AM: We've know about this story for a while. It's a BBC story actually by Angus Crawford which began this whole thing, started this whole thing off, but the truth is these companies are vastly, vastly profitable, hugely successful and they do it by mining our details, mining our inner life as it were, and therefore they don't want to answer you. Do you actually have the power to compel them to do what you think needs to be done?

MH: Yes, absolutely. Now I think that lots of people feel powerless in this situation, but of course we can act. We are a nation state, parliament is sovereign as we're discovering in the Brexit process, we can legislate if we need to. It would be far better to do it in concert with the social media companies, but if we think they need to do things that they are refusing to do, then we can and we must legislate. We are masters of our own fate as a nation and we must act to make sure that this amazing technology is used for good, not leading to young girls taking their own lives.

AM: And does that go far with threatening them with extra taxes and even banning them if they carry on doing this kind of stuff?

NH: Well ultimately parliament does that have that sanction. Yes. It's not where I'd like to end up in terms of banning them, of course because there's a great positive to social media too. But we run our country through parliament and we will and we must act if we have to.

Ends

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