DAVID LIDDINGTON, MP

Minister for the Cabinet Office

AM: I think I’m going to save your blushes. I’m not going to sit here and read out all the disobliging things that your colleagues have said about the Prime Minister. Can I just ask you, however, what your message is to all of those people saying all those things about how dull she is, how she’s got no vision, how she’s losing her grip?

DL: I think look at what she says and what she’s doing in office. You’ve got a woman there who has inherited an immense challenge in delivering a Brexit that will give prosperity and security for the United Kingdom, all its people for the future. But she’s not only doing that. When I sit with her, when I go in for the morning meeting at No 10, where I see the flash in the eye, what really is driving her in politics it’s not, you know, performing in front of the media, it’s public service. It’s making a difference on some of those big social policy challenges that successive governments have put to one side. It’s getting the right housing so our young people can live somewhere. It’s getting social care sorted out. It’s getting technical and vocational education fixed so that people will have secure jobs and careers in an age when, you know, artificial intelligence, robots are shaking up all our notions about employment. That’s what drives her on.

AM: But speaking of robots I mean your colleagues I mean your colleagues have been really really rude about her. Is your message that they should belt up?

DL: I think what I say to all my colleagues is the Conservative family, left, right and centre, because we’re a broad church, needs
to come together in a spirit of mutual respect - you know there are differences in any broad church - and look at what the bigger picture is showing. The bigger picture is showing after eight years in government we are still neck and neck with the Labour Party in the polls, we're taking seats off them in places like Bolton in local government elections last week and the good news – Andrew – the good news, the other thing my colleagues need to remember just look at last week’s news, unemployment lowest level for 40 years. Employment record levels. New borrowing figures lower than expected. New growth figures higher than expected. That’s the...

AM: So people like you who said that we were going to be in a disastrous position after Brexit have been proved wrong?

DL: Oh, I've been delighted by the way in which the British economy’s more resilient than I feared it was going to be but there is a formidable task, as we've all said in negotiating in the right deal for the UK.

AM: Okay. I’m going to give a quote. ‘We are taking two completely interconnected and aligned economies with high levels of trade and selectively moving them, hopefully, very modestly apart.’ Do you agree?

DL: I think that what we’re talking – that’s the Chancellor I think you’re quoting.

AM: Yes, do you agree with it?

DL: What I agree with him is that on the day after we leave, as the EU Withdrawal Bill in front of parliament now is making clear, is that business will be able to operate to the same legal framework and regulations as it is now. That’s what he was talking about.
AM: He wasn’t talking about the transition period, he was talking about the eventual end state and he said that he hoped for the sake of British business that we were very, very closely together.

DL: Philip has made it very clear that he’s fully onboard with the approach that the Prime Minister has set out in both her Lancaster House and her Florence speeches last year, when she talked about trying to get a deal in the forthcoming negotiations – we are leaving, I mean don’t be in any doubt about that but implementing what the people want.

AM: All right, okay, I’m sorry, I’m going to do this one more time.

DL: But we’re having a future trade agreement that we hope will be as frictionless and as free trade as we possibly can with our neighbours next door in Europe.

AM: Okay. ‘We’ve got two interconnected economies and we are selectively moving them hopefully very modestly apart.’ Do you agree?

DL: Well I’m not going into details about the negotiations.

AM: It’s absolutely crucial. The question is are we converging still or are we diverging? Are we going to diverge?

DL: Of course we will have the power to choose for ourselves whether or not to diverge once we have left the supranational legal structures of the EU. It is then a matter for a British government and a British parliament to decide well there may be some areas as the PM said where we want to achieve frankly the similar objective to the EU 27 but to do it in a different way. There may be other areas where actually we decide no, actually we have a slightly different objective in this area. Others, where we’re trying to do the same objective through exactly the same means.
In which case it makes sense for those areas to work very closely together.

AM: Jacob Rees-Mogg said recently: 'If everything is delayed for two years, as it will be, and then there's high alignment, as there seems there will be, you will find that by 2022 no one will have noticed any difference from having left. Then would be the point of voting for the Conservatives?' – he goes to say.

DL: Well I think first of all Jacob, like everybody else, just needs to see how the negotiations go. We're about to start negotiations and I'm not going to get into detail about that process. Secondly, the very fact that we will have left the European Union is a big deal indeed. The Bill in front of parliament extinguishes the power of the European Court and supranational EU law over the UK. We will have from next year a registration system that we've not had before for EU nationals coming to this country to register to show they're entitled to be in the UK. Those are big, big differences.

AM: So why do you think that people who watch this very closely, like Theresa Villiers this morning, thinks that it's going to be virtually no different from where we are at the moment, that we are not going to really notice the difference. This a virtual non-Brexit?

DL: Oh, I want - don’t get me wrong, Andrew – I want British businesses who trade across Europe and European businesses who trade with supply lines into the UK – have trade –

AM: As undisrupted as possible?

DL: undisrupted as possible and we're aiming to do that while at the same time delivering what the people voted for which is the bringing back of control over our laws here.

AM: Nobody knows exactly what the people voted for, it comes down to the details of a trade deal. My question is if you want
almost undisrupted trade then we have to give the Europeans things for that, apparently. It’s the kind of negotiations that we do.

DL: It’s a negotiation, whereas the PM has said repeatedly there’s going to be a need for give and take on both sides. It’s not just about trade though. Don’t forget that we’re very ambitious in terms of security partnerships for the future, police cooperation for the future because our interests and those of our neighbours in Europe are going to be similar on so many different issues. We want that deep and special partnership that Theresa May’s talked about.

AM: One of the great frustrations in public life at the moment is that nothing except Brexit gets discussed, and meanwhile there’s lots of other really, really important things. Over the last five years rough sleeping in this country has doubled. In the borough in which I live it’s gone up 670%. Why?

DL: It’s gone up for a number of different reasons and part of this is to do with the complexity of the people who often end up sleeping rough. Where you’re talking about people with mental health conditions, often a history of drug and alcohol problems.

AM: So all of those things have got worse?

DL: So that’s why the government has set a very ambitious target. We’re pledged to half rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminate it by 2027. We have set aside a very large sum of tax payer’s money, Andrew toward that.

AM: What have you got wrong up to now then? What have you got wrong?

DL: What we are doing now to sort it out is that we have backed –
AM: So you must have got something wrong?

DL: We have backed new legislation which is enabling us with local authorities in partnership to address the reasons why people become homeless, sleep rough, so that we prevent it rather than trying to deal with the problem when it occurs. We also, starting this year, a number of government funded pilot projects in different parts of the country to deal with some of these really complex cases. You have people who have serious mental health issues, people have got histories of offending and so on.

AM: Government funded pilots – we move on. Can I ask you about one –

DL: A pilot project is a good test. What works and what doesn’t.

AM: Let me ask you about one area where the government has been apparently very bold, because you are supporting legislation so that people who want to change gender can self-identify. I can say if I wanted to become a woman I just identify as a woman and then I will be treated as a woman. Can I ask you, do you think a trans woman is a woman?

DL: I think that somebody who is transgender or somebody who’s not yet gone through the operation – etc, and feels that you know they were born into the wrong body to use the phrase, deserves respect. We should respect people for who they are, however they identify.

AM: I completely agree with that. My question is slightly different of course.

DL: The question about the law, where that should be was something when Justine Greening was in charge of these matters, that she was preparing a public consultation on. Obviously she’s
now left the government. Her successors need to just take stock of that and decide how they want to take things forward.

AM: So is this still a live proposal by the government, that people can simply self-identify as women?

DL: It was one of the issues that Justine was talking about putting out to public consultation and that is still the case. There’s not yet been that public consultation. These are complex issues and I think it’s right that any proposal like this should be the subject of proper consultation with all people with any interest in this in order to make sure if we do make a change in policy, let alone the law, we get it right.

AM: LGBT campaigners say that your voting record on those issues has been pretty hostile over the years on gay marriage, on all sorts of other issues and having a gay envoy to Europe, LGBT envoy to Europe and so forth. Do you recognise that you have a problem with that community?

DL: I think that you know I mean my voting, on free votes on for this is a matter of record and I’ve come at it from like a traditional Christian point of view. I have to say – particularly you know civil partnerships came in and my own view has changed on that, looking at how gay friends of mine were really affected for the better by it.

AM: So you have changed?

DL: I would not vote against you know, civil partnerships and that sort of recognition today and I think it’s a settled issue in any case. What I always try to do and when I was at the Foreign Office –
AM: Well you give straight answers. Can I just test you one more time on whether you think a trans-woman is a woman?

DL: I think that that’s a matter for her. She should be treated –
AM: Her, you said, so the answer is basically yes?
DL: Yeah, I think she should be treated as a woman, but to be honest Andrew, I don’t you know spend time sort of perhaps thinking about this. I would try to deal with the person in front of me as they are with respect to that person whatever their background, you know, however they describe themselves. The same as you do when constituents come to see you as a local MP, you know. I don’t - I think when you try to categorise people, put them in pigeonholes you get into all sorts of difficulties.

AM: I was only asking you because it was a government policy, but David Lidington for now thank you very much.

Ends