BRANDON LEWIS, MP

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 29TH APRIL, 2018

BRANDON LEWIS, MP
Conservative Party Chairman

AM: Brandon Lewis is the Tory Chairman, charged with revitalising his party, but this weekend Tory morale is inextricably linked with the fate of Amber Rudd, the Home Secretary, over the treatment of the Windrush generation and a memo about targets for compulsory deportations which she ought to have seen. And Brandon Lewis was her Immigration Minister before he got his current job. He was the man, apparently, to whom the memo was sent.
So can I ask you first of all, Brandon Lewis, did you get that memo?

BL: Yes, absolutely. It was a memo to me.

AM: And do you remember reading it?

BL: Yes, I do actually, yes and one of the key things I think we need to remember with this memo – I think it was dated about the 4th of July, it was in my first week or two in that particular role, which I had for about six months. And it was a memo to me from the Immigration Enforcement Team outlining what the team had been doing, what they'd been doing and their achievements in the previous year with a bit of a forward look to what they thought they could in the year ahead.

AM: They were saying we've been doing very well. We're ahead of targets on these deportation figures.

BL: Well they were saying actually, generally what they were doing and as I say outlining their results from the previous year. Bearing in mind of course that one of the things I think the
government quite rightly has been focused on. I have to say as Immigration Minister I was equally focused on was increasing the number of illegal immigrants that are in this country that we want to remove. I think the British public want to know what the government is focused. Because we have to remember with some of this with the illegal immigration we have got people there, we’ve got criminals exploiting some of the most vulnerable people in the world through modern slavery. Rogue landlords who are exploiting people in terms of how they live, but also foreign national offenders. That’s criminals who are currently here at the tax payer’s expense. And I think people want to see the government deal with that, we were focused on that and that’s what they were outlining.

AM: So you had targets, this is from your point of view a policy to be celebrated, not hidden away from. Were you surprised when the Home Secretary told the Commons that she didn’t know about any deportation figures?

BL: Well I think actually you’ve got to bear in mind what she was saying on Wednesday. There are two different things going on here and I know the opposition like to conflate these things, Andrew. Let me just be very clear. What that report and that memo to me, that was a briefing memo effectively to me, was outlining the figures from the previous year and the team outlining to me that in the context of wanting to see that 10% increase in removals of illegal migrants and foreign national offenders, that what they thought they could – which was over a period of time and we were putting 10 million – the Home Secretary allocated another 10 million to that to look at – AM: And that is target clearly?

BL: No, to look at having that ambition to see another 10% increase in the years ahead. And the Immigration Enforcement Team outlining what they thought was achievable in the next year, based on what they had achieved the previous year.
AM: So when she told parliament: “We don’t have targets for removals,” that wasn’t true. And when she said: “If you’re asking me are there numbers of people we expect to be removed, that is not how we operate.” That is exactly how you operate, isn’t it? She’s told us herself.

BL: Well actually you’ve given a quote from what Amber said and she was right in what she said. If you look at the question – hold on Andrew – if you look at the question she was asked, she was being asked about the localised regional internal, effectively the KPI is the Immigration Enforcement Agency was using, and no she was not aware of that. She’s clear about that. I’ve worked with Amber and I know how focused she is on getting things right. And I think she’s also correct, now she’s aware of that, to say that’s not the right way to deal with something when we’re dealing with serious organised crime that works on a national basis.

AM: So you had these figures, you knew about the memo. You were, according to the National Audit Office chairing weekly meetings, proceeding on, looking at progress, looking at how the numbers are going. Did you discuss any of this with Amber Rudd as Immigration Minister?

BL: Well again, Andrew I think there’s two different things. First of all the memo did not talk about those internal targets that the Immigration Enforcement Team had, that was referred to the Home Affairs Select Committee. No, it didn’t. I had the memo Andrew, and what the memo outlines is the overall figure of the achievement they’d had in the previous year. Now I was working through on a weekly basis to make sure that we were doing everything we could. Working with the police, working with local government, making sure that we were doing what we could to help vulnerable people, to crack down on criminals and to remove more people who are here illegally. And yes, I did talk to the
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Home Secretary about that and the overall work we were doing and the overall ambition to see an increase in numbers, but not on the detailed targets.

AM: She knew there were targets therefore? If you had talked to her she must have known there were targets?

BL: No, what the Home Secretary was very aware of was her ambition to see an increase in the number of people who were being here illegally, that we were removing particularly those foreign national offenders.

AM: She put ten million quid -

BL: But those internal targets were not in the memo and not figures that she was aware of.

AM: But she had put 10 million quid in to get a 10% increase in deportations. If that is not a target what is it?

BL: Well actually what the Home Secretary done, having allocated a further £10 million to that team was said to the team what can we seek – what will the impact of that be? And that 10% is an ambition based on what we believed was the impact of the increase we could see in terms of the people we removed. And it is absolutely right.

AM: So the defence of the Home Secretary this is an ambition, not a target?

BL: Well actually there’s a big difference between the two things, because what the Home Secretary wanted to do was make sure we were spending tax payer’s money to do the right thing by some of the most vulnerable people in the world and to crack down on the criminals who are otherwise here at the British tax payer’s expense. And that is not acceptable.
AM: But this is a target. I mean again, going back to the original memo, they said: “progress has been made on a path towards the 10% increased performance on enforced returns which we promised the Home Secretary earlier this year.” That is a target promised to the Home Secretary.

BL: Absolutely, but that is different to what she was talking about on Wednesday. On Wednesday she was talking about the – the Home Affairs Select Committee was talking about the internal KPIs that that Immigration Enforcement Team had that she was not aware of. That’s different to the overarching ambition and aim that she had to see an increase of 10% overall in the returns of illegal immigrants. And she’s right to do that. We as a government need to be clear about that’s the right thing to do.

AM: She was asked, are the deportation targets – she said, I’m against deportation targets and no there aren’t, and she was wrong on both of those things. There are deportation targets, we’ve just been discussing them, and she knew about them.

BL: But again, Andrew you’re falling into the trap that some people put there. You’re conflating two different things. The discussion of the Home Affairs Select Committee. I think if you look back at the detail was about those internal regional localised targets that the Home Secretary has taken a view –

AM: I think they were just asking about targets.

BL: - that was not the way to do it and she was right to do that. But the overall target, that 10% increase –

AM: They were just asking about targets. This is a very, very, very sort of thin line to defend.

BL: No, no, they were talking about information they had had and previous evidence they had got which was around the internal workings of the Immigration Enforcement Agency. That’s a
different thing to looking to make sure that we’re doing everything we can to remove people from the country who are here illegally.

AM: I’m just reading her own words to parliament. “We don’t have targets for removals,” she said. Whatever the question she was asked she said, “we don’t have targets for removals.” You did have targets for removals. “If you’re asking me are there numbers of people we expect to remove that is not how we operate.” That is how they operate. She knew about it at the time by your own admission.

BL: Well also, Andrew you have to bear in mind although having put £10 million into this team to make sure that we were achieving more in terms of returning people who are here illegally, we do not have and the Home Secretary, no ministers or even the Immigration Enforcement Agency, don’t have full control of the issues that affect the number of people that can be returned. Quite often the courts will take a view about a country you can’t return to. I myself went to India to negotiate which we managed to agree in January a new agreement to be able to do enforced returns to India. All of these factors. So you can’t have – and that’s why it’s right the Home Secretary never had a view about a set figure. It was about seeing that overall aim of an increase in the number of returns that we had.

AM: But she may not have known all the detail but she certainly knew there were targets and she told the House of Commons there weren’t targets and she certainly knew that this was a system for increase the number of deportations. A system she now says she doesn’t agree with.

BL: Well what was at the Home Affairs Select Committee, as I say, was they were talking about and this was in response to questions about those internal KPI targets the Immigration Enforcement had. The Home Secretary herself is going to make a statement
and it’s right that she does that to parliament first tomorrow where she will explain the details behind this, but that is different the overarching aim she had to see, quite rightly, that work going forward to remove people who are in the country illegally.

AM: You were chairing these weekly meetings. Did she ever attend any of these weekly meetings? Did she ever attend any of these weekly meetings?

BL: No, these were meetings that I chaired. They were internal meetings with the team that I would do, and I would talk to the Home Secretary about the work we were doing and the success we were having.

AM: So you’d keep her in touch with what was going on in those meetings?

BL: In the overarching worked, because actually it was allied –

AM: She got memos from those meetings?

BL: I didn’t memo her on the meetings, no, because we were having them weekly, so I would talk to her about what we would discuss at those meetings. The fact that we were working with the police to crack down on serious organised crime that exploits people, working with local government, to show them how to crack down on.

AM: And she knew all about all of that?

BL: And she knew about that work, and she was very supportive of that. And actually that’s the work that the Home Office rightly continues to do.

AM: And did you send her minutes of these meetings?

BL: No, not that I recall. But obviously I don’t know what went in her box. What I do know is if Amber Rudd says she didn’t see that memo and I’m confident that she didn’t have that memo. When Amber Rudd says she didn’t see something, I know she didn’t see it.
AM: But you were talking to her about what’s going on?
BL: Absolutely. Talked to her about the general work we were
doing to increase the focus we had and to increase the number of
returns of illegal immigrants. That’s something that’s beneficial to
the whole of the country, because immigration - illegal
immigration - is bad for our economy, and it’s bad for the
vulnerable people who are exploited as a result of it. And Amber
was always hugely focused on making sure we were doing the
right thing and continue to do the right thing by some of the most
vulnerable people in the world. That’s why she’s such a good
Home Secretary.

AM: She may be a very good Home Secretary, but that also seems
to me to be inconsistent with what she told the House of
Commons, and that will be the issue tomorrow, I’m quite sure.
Can I ask you about going forward? There’s been some reports in
the papers today that on the table in the EU negotiations is the
possibility of other EU nationals, EU nationals from other countries
coming to this country with preferential status after we leave the
EU. Better status in terms of going for British jobs, access to the
NHS, access to social security and so forth. Is that on the table?
BL: Well, we’ve already got the agreement with Europe in
December, the agreement we had there for EU citizens who are in
the country, roughly three and half million EU citizens get settled
status. Obviously we’re now in the negotiations about what
happens through the implementation period, and moving onto the
negotiation about the final status. I’m not going to prejudge what
David Davis and the Prime Minister will be able to negotiate.

AM: The question is really, going ahead, whether EU citizens have
access to this country on a preferential status or preferential
background?
BL: Well, EU citizens who are in this country already will have the
ability –
AM: I’m talking about the ones who aren’t.
BL And people who come, as we’ve already outlined, EU citizens who come here in the implementation period with the ability, it will be a slightly different system to have to register, the ability to forwards for settled status. The situation after the implementation period hasn’t been decided yet.

AM: Alright. Can I ask you a very straightforward question? If we stay in the customs union is that delivering Brexit or not?
BL: Well, the Prime Minister has been very clear, we won’t be staying in the customs union. The country voted in the referendum, we’re going to deliver on that and we will be coming out of the customs union.

AM: What’s a customs partnership?
BL: Well, it’s different. A customs partnership is an agreement with the European Union about being able to trade with frictionless and easy, efficient borders, so we can continue really good trade. But importantly, give us the ability to work those trade agreements around the world where there’s so much opportunity for the British economy.

AM: And this customs partnership would involve us taking some of the tariffs for the EU, taking EU tariffs and passing them on?
BL: Well, actually I think this is where we’ve got to be very clear. There’s a big difference. There’s the argument that Vince Cable and others would put, if we were stay in the customs union when we’ve left the European Union we’d have less say and less power over what’s happening.

AM: What’s a customs partnership, though?
BL: Well, I’ll just explain that, Andrew. Less say and less power over the tariffs that are put on us because we won’t be part of the decision making process. It’d be put upon us. So that’s why it’s absolutely right that we leave the customs union as the Prime Minister has said. In a partnership that means we’re negotiating the agreements we have as we go forward, and that will be part
of those negotiations about that final end state after the implementation period.

AM: So why does Jacob Rees-Mogg call the partnership cretinous?
BL: Well, none of us have yet seen the final decision. Jacob has his own wonderful way with words to explain things. I think it’s important that we are able to get the opportunities of trade deals around the world, good trade deals with our partners and friends in Europe, and that’s what a good partnership will deliver, and I believe that’s what the Prime Minister and David Davis will deliver for this country.

AM: A sort of parallel question to the one I asked Andrew Gwynne, do you worry that the Windrush controversy is going to affect the results of the local elections from your point of view?
BL: Well, the experience I’ve had, I’ve been all over the country over the last few weeks, we’ve got elections all over the country, is people on the doorstep talk about the issues that matter to them locally, and that’s what they’re focused on. Whether it’s in Birmingham where they’re frustrated with Labour not even collecting the rubbish, whether it’s in Manchester where they’re frustrated that Conservative councils are cheaper for their council tax and still investing in good frontline services. It’s the issues that matter locally, and in Sutton this last week, a Liberal Democrat area, absolute frustration on literally every doorstep with the most ridiculous bin collection scheme that needs to be simplified. And local council votes can do that.

AM: So a good night for the Tories, a bad night for the Tories, where should we be looking?
BL: Well, we’ve seen Labour – it was interesting to see Andrew just now, moving back from their original predictions of turning the whole of London red, but we’ve got elections all over the country and we’re working hard to make sure we get good councillors elected in every part of the country.
AM: Okay, just coming back to my first line of questioning, can you say categorically that you have never been in a room with Amber Rudd talking about deportation targets?
BL: I’ve been in a room with Amber Rudd talking about increasing the number of returns, but Amber Rudd and I never discussed particular numbers in the way that was outlined at the Home Affairs Select Committee.
(ends)