AM: Welcome, Tom Watson.
TW: And welcome to the west midlands, Andrew.
AM: Thank you very much indeed. Can I ask you about the crucial question, I suppose, that people are still asking themselves. Is Labour actually now committed to a second referendum?
TW: Look, we came out of our conference, I think our position is clear. We want parliament to have a meaningful vote on the deal that Theresa May hopefully will bring back from Brussels. If parliament can’t have a meaningful vote we want a general election to discuss it. We want people to be able to discuss the nuances of that plan, and if we cannot deliver that through Theresa May’s refusal, then it is still on the table that we would want a people’s vote on the deal.

AM: Let me ask you about a general election, which Theresa May has ruled out – perhaps not surprisingly. But for that to happen, lots of Tory MPs have to vote for a general election. How likely is that really to happen?
TW: Well, who knows what the future holds?
AM: It’s a bit unlikely isn’t it?
TW: There’s a golden rule in politics, you should never talk about hypotheticals, and the entire political class for the last year has been talking about hypotheticals. If she cannot get a deal or if she gets a deal that cannot get a meaningful vote in parliament, it seems to me the game’s up. I’ve said before on this programme, she’s a Prime Minister governing without a majority, and so the only decent thing to do, I think, would be to have a general election because that’s the only way we’re going to remove ourselves from this impasse. So you know, I can’t predict the future.
AM: In those circumstances, if there was another election, perhaps even before Christmas, would Labour include in its manifesto a promise for another referendum or not?
TW: Again it’s too early for us to tell on that. We need to see what the deal looks like. We don’t even know if there will be a deal. And it’s not in my gift or in Jeremy’s gift what the manifesto looks like. The thing about turning a party over to its members is they have a say in what the final document will be. But we’re not ruling it out.

AM: Of course not. If you get that general election and you win it’s still quite unclear what you then do, because a lot of what you say about Theresa May is also true of you. Particularly, for instance, cherry picking. You say you want all the benefits of the single market and the customs union but you don’t want to accept the industrial rules, the state aid rules and much else. That is classic, classic cherry picking.
TW: I don’t agree with that, Andrew. You know, at the very start of this process Keir Starmer laid down the six tests. We’ve said they will be the final – we will apply those tests to the deal when it comes through. And we think that’s a perfectly reasonable approach to take for Her Majesty’s official opposition that is there to hold the government to account. You know, we’ve said we want a jobs-first Brexit. I won’t go through all the tests. And we think that’s a reasonable approach for us to take. And over the course of the last 18 months of course we’ve forced the Prime Minister into concessions. We made the government agree that they needed transitional arrangements which will genuinely help companies in this area, like Jaguar Land Rover, who have already publically spoken out about their fears of a no deal Brexit.

AM: What’s your solution to the Irish border problem?
TW: Well, for us, we’ve think there could be a negotiated settlement on that. One of the tests we’ve got is are our borders protected. I think what it certainly isn’t going to be, it isn’t going
to be Boris Johnson building a bridge to Ireland. I mean, all that
guy ever talks about is building bridges. I think it’s about time, in
the national interest, that he built bridges with his own Cabinet to
try and get some unity.

AM: Well, tragically, Boris is not there to talk about his bridges.
But you are here to talk about the Labour Party policy, because
up to now the Labour Party policy has basically said, ‘our answer
to the Northern Ireland question is the customs union.’ But you
know that is not a sufficient answer, don’t you?
TW: Well, look, we think that a customs union or a form of
customs union should be the premise of the negotiations. That’s
where the jobs and where economic stability come from, and
that’s why that’s part of our six tests.

AM: Michel Barnier, way back in March, says, ‘it should be well
understood that even in a customs union a country which is
outside the single market always faces border checks to ensure
compliance with European standards. Under your plan there
would have to be an Irish border.
TW: Well, look, we genuinely believe that the six tests should be
applied to our deal, and if Theresa May can’t –
AM: I’m asking about the Irish border, which you can’t –
TW: Look, if she can’t get a deal on the border, then we would
like to try and negotiate one. And I think that our form of a
customs – joining a form of a customs union allows us to find a
negotiated settlement for that border.

AM: But you don’t have an idea which would resolve it, is my
point.
TW: Well, I think we can reach an accommodation with the
European negotiators, because their issue is they want a
functioning customs union that doesn’t give someone outside the
customs union an unfair advantage. And that’s why we think that
Theresa May could get closer to us on where we’re saying a
customs union should go. That’s up to her of course. You know, when Jeremy Corbyn did his speech –

AM: I’ll ask you one more time. The customs union doesn’t resolve the problem.

TW: Well, I think it can get –

AM: And you don’t seem to have an alternative idea which does.

TW: I think it gets you to a point in the negotiation where you can reach a compromise, and I think it’s perfectly within our grasp if we come closer to that model of a customs union.

AM: So you’re talking about coming closer to what they want. In the same spirit of that, Jeremy Corbyn told the Conservative Party – start again. Jeremy Corbyn told the Labour Party conference that if Theresa May came back with something that was inside the customs union and wasn’t going to undermine workers’ rights and regulations and all the rest of it he would support her in the House of Commons. Now, he knows perfectly well, and you know perfectly well that she can’t go as far as an actual customs union. But if she moves further towards what you want would you really vote her down and provoke possibly a no deal result?

TW: Look, the six tests were not drawn out of thin air. They’re based on the commitments that the former Brexit Secretary gave, and that will be how we apply her deal. But you know, Jeremy Corbyn reached out in the conference speech and, you know, Theresa May has not reached out to any opposition party, and certainly not the official opposition, in the last 18 months. Jeremy Corbyn reached out and that was rejected by the Conservative Party Chairman, Brandon Lewis, in the Evening Standard the next day. That’s a great tragedy because we think we could have helped Theresa May get a better deal. And if she does want to help us – if she does want to get a deal through, then the six tests form a basis of the test that we will give to her.
AM: An awful lot of your own MPs and peers and supporters would like us to be inside the single market as well as the customs union. What’s wrong with that?

TW: Well, we’re getting closer – the six tests, you know, it’s impossible to leave the EU whilst being a member of the single market, and they know that. And some of our Remain MPs have had to give a little.

AM: All the options that are now in front of the country at the moment, ranging from a free trade deal on the Canada model right the way through to EEA membership like Norway, there’s a range of options all of which have problems. I’m just asking you why you think going to the EEA-style answer is an impossible outcome, because for a lot of people it’s a very good outcome?

TW: Well, we think we need a bespoke deal for the United Kingdom, and that is within the grasp of the negotiators. And as the official opposition it’s our constitutional duty to hold the government to account. That’s why those six tests have become so consistent. The reason they’ve become so relevant now of course is because Theresa May can’t get a deal on the Chequers plan because even her own Cabinet are split on that, and actually her backstop deal, the World Trade Organisation and hard Brexit deal looks like it’s going to fall apart as well because the World Trade Organisation itself is on a precipice. Donald Trump is refusing to appoint judges to its arbitration committee that could mean the World Trade Organisation collapses. And on that basis, she can’t get Chequers through, she hasn’t got a plan B, the only option in town is to come and talk to the Labour Party, the official opposition, and we’ve been very clear for 18 months we have six tests that should be applied to the deal and if she comes and meets us on them, then we’ll be prepared to talk to her.

AM: And if she can’t come all the way to meet you, you would vote this down. And you would provoke exactly the same kind of no deal result that all the WTO result, answers you’ve been ..
TW: I’m afraid the six tests represent a compromise within my own party and we applied those six tests as a result of the commitments that she made saying that she thought they could all be deliverable, and David Davis made. We think it’s a model set of principles that can help her negotiating stance, and if she’s prepared to reach out I’m sure we’d talk to her.

AM: So it’s six tests or no deal?

TW: Well, I think her current plan, which relies heavily on no deal having a World Trade Organisation backstop is also now in peril because the World Trade Organisation itself can’t – it looks like it’s not going to be able to do its job in the next few months.

AM: The trouble is, Tom Watson, everybody is making it’s my way or the highway, no compromise. And as that goes on we get closer and closer and closer to no deal with all the consequences that you know about.

TW: Well, we know our national duty and we know what our obligation is as the official opposition. You know, she can either face down her backbenchers and her own Cabinet, she can either go to Donald Trump and say, ‘please don’t destroy the World Trade Organisation,’ or she can come to the Labour Party and look at our six tests. The choice is hers. We’ve been very consistent in the last 18 months – I know people criticise us about it but we’ve not moved our position, we’ve been very consistent. Keir Starmer has meticulously and patiently mapped out the principles that we’ll apply to the deal, and they still apply.

AM: And you may come to a situation where you’re campaigning for another referendum. What do you say to voters in your own constituency, which voted Leave, who may feel betrayed? There’s the political class yet again not taking yes for an answer.

TW: Well, first of all I’d say to my voters what I’ve said consistently on this programme, that is not our preferred option. We want a meaningful vote of MPs and parliament on a deal. We
want the deal to apply Labour’s six tests. If parliament, because Theresa May doesn’t have a majority, can’t get a deal through, then we think people should decide in a general election, and that would give my voters the right to challenge me on the doorstep, as they’ve been doing for the last 17 years. And if Theresa May refuses them the right to have their say in a general election, then we think we should negotiate a second people’s vote.

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