ANDREW MARR SHOW
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MICHEAL MARTIN

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AM: Welcome and thanks for joining us, Mr Martin. Was it really true that the first you heard about this extraordinary EU plan was when Boris Johnson phoned you and told you about it?
MM: No. I don't know where you got that from, Andrew, but that certainly was not the case. As you know, the Commission issued a public announcement on the issue, and that's when we first became aware of it, and my chief official responsible for the protocol on European affairs more generally contacted Usula von der Leyen's team immediately and I then contacted the President of the Commission and articulated the very serious implications the move would have for the operation of the protocol and the protocol itself. And to be fair to the President of the Commission, took on board fairly quickly my concerns and that began a series of engagements between our two teams and I had a number of conversations with President von der Leyen and in the aftermath of those I also spoke of course to the British prime minister, to Boris, and we discussed the implications of all of this and the importance of getting a resolution by the close of that evening, by Friday evening. And thankfully the Commission did issue a statement pulling back and reversing its decision, and that is the factual situation as it emerged on Saturday evening.

AM: So Taoiseach, what do you think went wrong? Because for a lot of people it’s absolutely extraordinary that the Commission would take a decision like this, that affects Ireland so fundamentally, without talking to your government first.
MM: My observation is that the terrible row – it’s an acrimonious row between AstraZeneca and the Commission over the contractual obligations of the company in respect of supplying
vaccines to European member states – took centre stage here and people were blindsided by the decision that was taken and its implications for the protocol...

AM: The Commission should still have spoken to you first. I’m so sorry, I was just saying even so the Commission should have spoken to you first, should it not?

MM: Yes, and we’ve had that conversation. And I think there are a lot of lessons to be learned from how all of this transpired, because it took four years to put the protocol together, we’d been four years negotiating the fallout of the Brexit referendum, been putting together other European-UK trade and cooperation agreements, and critically the putting in place of the withdrawal agreement and the protocol to facilitate access for Northern Ireland’s economy to the single market as well as of course to the UK market, and to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland and to facilitate economic activity on the island of Ireland. I mean, it’s a good thing, the protocol overall. There are issues that that we have to fine tune and work out, but essentially I think there are positives there medium term for Northern Ireland in terms of its economic development which we should not underestimate.

AM: Well, let’s talk about the medium term, because Arlene Foster described this as an act of incredible hostility to Northern Ireland, and now we’ve got people in Northern Ireland and in London speaking of invoking Article 16 in the reverse direction. What do you think are the possible long term consequences of this row?

MM: Well, two points I would make. It certainly wasn’t an act of hostility by the European Commission. My experience all along throughout the Brexit debate has been an acute awareness, notwithstanding the events on Friday, on behalf of European Union member states, and indeed the Commission, about getting the Northern Ireland situation right and supporting the overall edifice of the Good Friday Agreement and making sure that we would negotiate structures and mechanisms like the protocol that
would facilitate the continuation of the Good Friday Agreement and all of its aspects. Secondly, in terms of the implications here, I do think that having discussed this with the British Prime minister, and indeed with the Commission, that there’s an opportunity now to re-engage, to make sure that the protocol operates smoothly, and efficiently on behalf of all citizens on the island, and particularly around issues pertaining to the movement of goods between the UK and Northern Ireland. It took four years to put this together, we are only four weeks into the agreement and into the operation of the protocol, there are bound to be teething problems, but I do acknowledge the need for engagement here on all sides between the European Union, the United Kingdom and the Irish government, and indeed the Northern Ireland executive. And there are mechanisms to facilitate that.

AM: Okay. Meanwhile the EU are going to impose controls. Do you personally think it would be wrong for the EU to halt the arrival of Pfizer vaccines into the UK?
MM: I don’t think that’s the intention. I think the EU has good relations with Pfizer, as with other companies. There has been a problem with AstraZeneca and the European Commission. I think there was shock across Europe when the original commitment from the company in terms of 100 million doses, it emerged it was not going to be realised and that caused a lot of tension.

AM: Sorry to jump in, but I suppose if the EU is not intending to halt or delay the arrival of vaccines into the UK, it’s hard to see what the point of all of this was.
MM: Well, the point was transparency in terms of the relationship between AstraZeneca and the EU Commission. There’s a very fair point there, Andrew, which cannot be brushed aside either. The problem led the Commission to draw a mechanism in invoking Article 16 of the protocol to deal with it. But there is an issue and, you know, in terms of my discussions with the Commission they’ve had good robust but transparent engagement with other
companies. There’s a range of companies that the EU are engaged with in terms of vaccine production and supply. But I think overall, my own personal view is that the more people that get vaccinated across Europe, and including in the United Kingdom, is a good thing. You know, we were watching what’s happening in the UK and saying, ‘well done, you’re vaccinating quickly and well.’ That’s important. We’ve many Irish people working in the NHS in the UK, many people vaccinating there, many Irish citizens operating and working in the United Kingdom, so overall of course we all need to roll out the vaccination programme as effectively and efficiently as we can. So I would like to dial down the tone and work collegiately is the best way to deal with this.

AM: Looking ahead, therefore, I mean, the UK has something like 376 million doses of different vaccines on order, far more than the UK needs. Would you like to see the UK quite soon starting to distribute some of that vaccine both into the EU, but also, because there’s a common travel area between our countries, into Ireland as well?

MM: Well, first of all I think the – we will, similar to the UK, ultimately have a surplus of vaccines, all going well and all of the contracts and the delivery schedules coming in on time from the other companies, certainly towards the end of Q2, Q3. Obviously I think about 13-15 per cent of the first doses have been administered in the UK, so you have a long way to go, we have a long way to go, Europe has a long way to go. But critical as I know the UK’s committed to this and the European Union is as well, in line with WHO concerns I think all of us have a collective responsibility to ensure that the developing world, and particularly frontline workers in the developing world, are vaccinated as well. This is a global situation.

AM: Sure.

MM: There’s very little point in the virus raging across developing countries while we vaccinate 100 per cent here, because that would mean more mutations, and I just heard your earlier
conversation, that creates its own potential complications in terms of vaccines and so forth. So we've a journey to go, but I think we will get there and I think we, as I said earlier, if we can just calm down all of us, there's an understandable race against time in relation to getting the vaccines out but if you think about it, what has happened in the last 10 months has been truly remarkable: that we've managed to facilitate the development of vaccines in such a short space of time. There's a lot of understandable anxiety, but we will get there.

AM: We will get there. Just returning to the little local difficulties, the EU has suggested that AstraZeneca vaccine produced in the UK should now be diverted to the EU. Do you think that's a good idea?

MM: Well, I think the main issue with the EU Commission and AstraZeneca is that the contractual obligations that we were signed up to be delivered. Now, that's it, and AstraZeneca have manufacturing sites across Europe, in the UK. The precise mechanism by which AstraZeneca delivers on its contractual obligations is a matter for AstraZeneca. But there is a genuine desire within the European Union that the contract is honoured, and that will obviously be the subject of further discussions with the company and the Commission.

AM: I suppose the thing is that the UK signed the contract with AstraZeneca months and months before the EU did, and that contact obliged AstraZeneca to provide the UK first. Something has gone wrong inside the EU's procurement process. What do you think it is?

MM: Well, you're suggesting that. And I know the UK, to be fair, have signed contracts with AstraZeneca, have put a lot of investment in behind AstraZeneca. But likewise, the EU did as well. And it seems to me the same problems have not arisen in relation to, for example, the relationship between the Commission and Pfizer Biontech, Moderna, or indeed Johnson and Johnson and
others. So it’s not a one way process here, there’s clearly two players here, and I know that the Commission is not happy in relation to the situation with AstraZeneca.

AM: Indeed, Taoiseach. Do you not think, however, I mean if you look at the Irish targets you had two targets and you’re going to miss both of them for vaccination. Other parts of the EU are way, way behind. Something has gone wrong in the procurement process, surely? There must be some reason -

MM: The issue is what’s gone wrong. What’s gone wrong clearly, at this stage, is that the commitments made in terms of volume levels are not being realised in terms of the contractual engagement between the Commission and AstraZeneca. And the Pfizer Biontech has come on track on time and we have, in Ireland, we have delivered vaccines, as fast as we’re getting them in we’ve administered them back out, and we’re doing it differently in terms of medical authorisation, you know, in terms of the authorisation process of the vaccines, which is slower in Europe, because we haven’t invoked the emergency authorisation mechanism, and we’re also not doing the – we’re doing the one dose and the second dose in line with the data presented by the companies. But each country will do it differently to a certain extent, and that’s a matter for each sovereign state in terms of how the vaccines are administered. But again it’s early days, Andrew.

AM: I understand that.

MM: It is early days in terms of vaccination rollout and I said on the first of December we would have low volumes in January and February, and that’s how it has materialised.

AM: One other aspect of the politics of this that will have alarmed an awful lot of people in Britain, and I suspect outside Britain as well, is when President Macron said, and I quote, that the AstraZeneca vaccine was ‘quasi-ineffective’ on those aged over 65
and possibly over 60. That is not true, so far as we can tell. Is it dangerous to say those kind of things?

MM: Yes, I don’t think politician should pronounce on the efficacy or otherwise of vaccines. I think we should leave that to the authorisation bodies. And in the European case, in terms of the European Medicines Agency, and you have your authorities in the United Kingdom, we have our own member state bodies as well, which is currently examining that issue right now. But I think what that comment does reflect, though, and I think people need to realise this, there is significant tension across Europe in relation to the sense across Europe that commitments entered into by AstraZeneca have not been fulfilled. Now, AstraZeneca may dispute that, but that’s a very strong sense across Europe, that Europe signed up, made financial commitments to AstraZeneca, had an expectation of significant higher volumes of vaccine to be delivered in a timely manner, which is not now materialising. And I think people need to realise that if you were in a contract and you had expectations and you’d signed up to something and that didn’t materialise, then you’d be fairly angry too, and there would be a lot of tension about the place. And that is what, in my view, has happened here, and that is the broader context that has given rise to all of the issues that we’ve been discussing from the protocol to the supply of vaccines. The same type of tensions do not appear to have arisen in relation to the other companies. Put it that way, too. And that’s my observations of the situation.

AM: Taoiseach, thank you very much indeed for talking to us. Much appreciated, thanks so much.

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