ANDREW MARR SHOW  
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TOM WATSON

AM: Mr Watson –

TW: Happy Mother’s Day.

AM: Happy Mother’s Day, thank you. And to all mothers. Now, the main thing, however right at the moment is all of those people who are very upset, very angry that we’re not, as of today, outside the EU blame the Labour Party for that. And they’re right to, aren’t they?

TW: I don’t think they blame the Labour Party, but I do think they’re very angry that we’ve had a thousand days of Brexit chaos without a negotiation. And that’s why I think it’s important that this week, despite all the fuss and the fury in parliament, it looks like Labour’s emerging compromise is something that can reunite the country, that can bring Leavers and Remainers together.

AM: I’ll come onto that in just a second, but this week the meaningful vote two or meaningful vote two and a half or three, or whatever it was, went down again because the Labour Party voted against the Withdrawal Agreement. Can I ask you what was it in the Withdrawal Agreement the Labour Party objected to?

TW: What we’ve consistently said, I’ve consistently said on this programme, we’ve been saying it for two years, that we have Jeremy Corbyn’s red lines on this negotiated by Keir Starmer and we are prepared to talk to the government if Theresa May is prepared to have a concessionary strategy.

AM: But Keir Starmer said that almost any deal will need a Withdrawal Agreement. There doesn’t appear to be anything in this Withdrawal Agreement the Labour Party actually objects to, and yet you voted against it for party political reasons.

TW: No, we voted against it because it was uncoupled from the political declaration and we think can undermine the livelihoods of many families and workers in the United Kingdom that have lost out after nearly a decade of Tory austerity. We have to make sure that they’re secure in any exit deal, and that’s why those red lines we set down two years ago, two and a half years ago, are so important.

AM: You mentioned the Labour version of Brexit. Now, it looks as if MPs are going to kind of gather round some version of a softer Brexit and vote that through – perhaps – tomorrow. Now, Labour’s version was not one of the most popular ones. It may not even be selected by the Speaker tomorrow. If the Speaker selects Ken Clarke, the Father of the House’s version of a common market, customs union-based arrangement, will Labour MPs vote in numbers for that?
TW: Well, we have to see where – what is selected tomorrow.

AM: Of course.

TW: But it seems to me that parliament, certainly Labour MPs, are coming together with an emerging consensus that whatever that deal looks like – and we understand there have to be compromises – if it’s underpinned by a people’s vote, that is the way we can bring the country back together. More than 80 per cent of my colleagues voted for a people’s vote this week. If the polls are true, 80 per cent of our members supported. There were a million people sharing their concern in the demonstration a week and a half ago. It’s no surprise to me that we’ve had a little boost in the polls because we’re offering that consensus, that attempt to bring the country back together, and I’m sure that whatever the outcome of the actual withdrawal deal negotiations, if it’s underpinned by a people’s vote we can eventually win a consensus that that’s the right way forward.

AM: But you could live with a customs union-based answer to this?

TW: We’ve said we want a form of custom union –

AM: I’m asking what you could live with, because we’re on to second best at the moment.

TW: I think we need to see where those votes go, and the discussions go in parliament this week.

AM: Alright, you’ve mentioned the people’s vote, so-called, the another referendum, can I ask you are you in favour of another referendum under all circumstances? In other words, for a Labour version, for a customs union, prime minister’s vote, whatever it must have a second vote?

TW: I think that’s the only way we can bring the country back together now and both Keir Starmer and Jeremy Corbyn have said that this week. You know, our members are looking for a huge change in our political economy. There are so many millions of losers after a decade of austerity. We need to move beyond Brexit, and it seems to me the only way we can do that now is with a people’s vote. The people’s vote is the solution, not an option. It’s the way we can move the country on.

AM: Is that Labour policy?

TW: Yes, that’s Labour policy.

AM: Well because Richard Burgon, your Shadow Justice Secretary, said, ‘we are not a referendum-in-all-circumstances party’. He must be wrong then, mustn’t he? You just said you are.
TW: Well, not really. I absolutely acknowledge to you that there are very strong views held in all parties that are different. But this week both Jeremy and Keir Starmer have said we support a people’s vote. That is our conference policy. Now we’ve obviously had some of our Shadow Cabinet members who abstained on the people’s vote thing last week, so I’m not saying that everyone’s in favour of it. But you’d expect that, given the magnitude of the debate around Brexit. What I’m saying is I think this is the way we can bring the country back together.

AM: Are you saying today that another referendum will be in Labour’s manifesto?

TW: Obviously I don’t write Labour’s manifesto. I’m one vote around the table. But it seems to me inconceivable that if there was a general election tomorrow, and we hope there will be, we’ve been calling for one for months, that a people’s vote will be in that manifesto.

AM: Now, you’ve said you’ve had a bounce in the polls at the moment, and you have. Is the party now preparing for European elections as well as for a general election imminently?

TW: Yes. I’ve spoken to Jeremy last night. He’s putting us on election footing. I’m going to be talking to our NEC members later today, because obviously we need to reselect our sitting MPs ready for a general election. And if there are European elections – and it seems to me whatever outcome of Brexit, we are going to go beyond that trigger date on the negotiations. We’ll be ready for European elections, and we want our members to decide who our candidates are.

AM: And you’re convinced this is popular. But out there a lot of people are going to be groaning and throwing things at the television saying, ‘not again, no another referendum,’ it doesn’t really solve the problem.

TW: Well, I’m sorry to say that but what I think people would understand, I mean, this is a reluctant conclusion we’ve come to. We’d prefer parliament to have a meaningful vote on a referendum, but some people in parliament have sort of elevated Brexit to religion.

AM: In this referendum, what’s on the ballot paper? Is it whatever deal has got parliament’s approval, whether it’s customs union or a Labour deal or the prime minister’s deal versus staying in, or is it versus no deal?

TW: It has to be a meaningful form of Brexit. Not a unicorn one that can’t be negotiated. It needs to be a meaningful form of Brexit. So whatever the deal is, it’s the status quo or the new deal, and it seems to me that that’s important, because three years ago of course people voted on the basis of lies and law-breaking. In fact we found out this week that Vote Leave have dropped their appeal, and yet we’ve had two Cabinet Ministers who seek to be leader of the Conservative Party denying that Vote Leave broke the law. Boris Johnson and Michael
Gove. I hope they can put the matter right now that we know that they did break the law and people voted on the basis of lies and law-breaking.

AM: Well, we’ve talked to Gisela Stuart on the programme already about that. Can I ask you, however, under your proposal an awful lot of people – I think we’ve got a graphic somewhere – 35 per cent of all voters now support no deal and of Leave voters 70 per cent support no deal. Under your proposal they’ll be entirely disenfranchised in this. What would they do in another referendum? They’ll have no one to vote for.

TW: I think what we’re saying is what is in the interests of the country? Every - nearly all MPs in parliament have looked at what crashing out of the EU looks like. It looks like millions of jobs in peril, people losing out. And so Brexit has to be meaningful, you need a – you can’t just go on myths and unicorns on this. And that’s why I think Theresa May’s deal, maybe with concessions, and remain is the way forward, and that’s the solution not an option, so that the country can then move on and look at the challenges we’re going to face in the future with things like artificial intelligence.

AM: So you’d sweep no deal off the table completely?

TW: Well, what is no deal? I mean, no deal is no security arrangements with Europe, no trading arrangements, it means companies won’t be able to share data across borders. No deal is the disaster scenario and it’s not in anybody’s interest.

AM: Quite a lot of Tory MPs and some Labour MPs are talking kind of sotto voce about an agreement across the House of Commons to get the country out of this, a so-called government of national unity. And your name has been mentioned in relation to this. Can you explain what that means?

TW: I don’t want a national unity government, I want a Labour government that negotiates a better Brexit deal that allows the people to have their say on that and then transforms the economy of Britain to benefit the many not the few.

AM: You’ve introduced a new policy this morning about a new national banking system based on post offices. It’s a big policy. It sounds very much like you’re gearing up for an election.

TW: We are gearing up for an election. But this is very important, because obviously the financial sector is key to our economy, but there are too many losers in that. You know, there are many, many millions of people now who live miles away from a retail bank. The way we think you change that is using the post office network to allow people to do their banking transactions, and RBS should remain in public hands, and that could help invest in those small businesses that will get us through Brexit.
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