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For TRIM please.

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Programme	Sunday Politics – Robin Swann		
Date & Time	15.11.20 – 10.02		
Subject	Coronavirus restrictions		
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MARK CARRUTHERS

The Health Minister's recommendation to extend the latest coronavirus restrictions here by two weeks was backed by the majority of his Executive colleagues last week but controversially the biggest party around the table, the DUP, deployed a cross community veto to block his proposal. Ultimately Mr Swann ended up backing Diane Dodds plan which will see restrictions start to be lifted from next Friday.

The Chair of the BMA here has described the Executive's decision as 'not competent, certainly negligent and a betrayal of healthcare workers', why did you back the Economy Minister's proposal?

ROBIN SWANN

Can I just say at the outset that it was very clear that I didn't get what I wanted from the Executive this week, I wanted the regulations and the restrictions to continue for another two weeks and that was to drive down the infection rate of covid (unclear) see a decrease in the number of people we currently have in hospital due to Covid 19. In regards to why I backed the eventual compromised proposal that

came to the table, for me that was better than everything falling. I would (unclear) as I said a couple of minutes ago, I really wanted the two week extension of what we currently have because there is no certainty in how we manage Covid 19 here in Northern Ireland.

MARK CARRUTHERS

Diane Dodds described her proposal of course as balanced and proportionate, is that how you see it?

ROBIN SWANN

No it's not, it was a compromise agreement that came about, I supported it reluctantly, my concerns were minuted within the Executive, I don't think this is enough, I don't think it's enough at this time and I do honestly believe, and I said that I think we will be back as a Department of Health looking for further restrictions and further regulations before Christmas.

MARK CARRUTHERS

It's interesting that you should say it was a compromise agreement, you don't necessarily agree with Diane Dodds that it's balanced and proportionate, do you have some sympathy then for the BMAs view that it wasn't a (unclear) and that it was a negligent decision and is a betrayal of healthcare workers, you might not use those words exactly but your sympathies lie in that general direction do they?

ROBIN SWANN

My sympathies lie with my healthcare staff, my sympathies lie with the people of Northern Ireland who rely on our health service because my duty and my responsibility as Minister of Health is to make sure that we have the health service that can meet the needs of the people when they need it but also support the people working in it and I think the decisions that we've seen, while I did reluctantly support them where better than the regulations falling actually on Friday and that's why I supported the compromised position because it was better than nothing.

MARK CARRUTHERS

So you were backed into a corner effectively?

ROBIN SWANN

I was accepting Diane's proposal or nothing or the restrictions falling, they'd ran out of time, that's why I came over a week ago to the Executive with my paper asking for a full extension of the regulations for two weeks. I'm disappointed, I'm embarrassed, I'm ashamed that it took us to Thursday to actually come up with this compromise agreement that doesn't go, in my opinion, far enough.

MARK CARRUTHERS

The DUP, here's the interesting point for you and I just wonder how you respond to this fact, it's now clearly using the fact that you voted for its plan as a vindication for its position all along. Suzanne Breen writes in today's Sunday Life, you and Naomi Long gave the DUP cover, do you accept that charge?

ROBIN SWANN

What we did, what Naomi and I did was ensure that the two, that the regulations that we have in place didn't fall on Thursday night. That was the option that we put in front of us, that is where the cross community veto had taken us to, it would have been deployed again and we know it would have been deployed again, it was unfortunate that it was used, it has been now portrayed and it's been portrayed by other political parties that this has now become an orange and green issue. I'm a unionist Minister, a cross community vote was used against a health recommendation that I brought forward to extend these regulations by two weeks.

MARK CARRUTHERS

And that was clearly a mistake in your view?

ROBIN SWANN

It was a mistake, we argued, we went back and forward and we debated for nearly a week in regards to what was a simple ask coming forward from the Department of Health, to extend the regulations for two weeks so that we could see a further decrease in the number of Covid positive tests across

Northern Ireland and we could see a decrease in the number of admissions and current inpatients in our hospitals and ICUs, that wasn't to be and it was never going to be when we saw the outworkings of what was going on within the Executive. So when it came to that compromise position, one that I did support reluctantly because it was better than the regulations falling.

MARK CARRUTHERS

So we're now in a position where we have this compromise agreement on the table, from next Friday there will be the beginning of the a reopening here of some of the businesses affected by these restrictions and then that will open up again further the following Friday, that's two weeks' time. Do you believe that you as Health Minister and the Chief Medical Officer are getting enough support for what you have to do from DUP Ministers in the Executive?

ROBIN SWANN

Between now and the 27th I would say I will, I'm near enough confident, I will be coming again to the Executive with a number of recommendations in regards to what will happen post 27th.

MARK CARRUTHERS

So when DUP Ministers say what is good about our compromise is that we now have a firm commitment to reopen the hospitality sector on 27th November, we have clarity for those businesses which have had anything but clarity over the past four weeks, you are saying today clearly are you that you can't give that guarantee, that you think you will be coming back with the CMO to say hold on it's not safe to reopen on Friday 27th?

ROBIN SWANN

We will come forward with a number of recommendations, what they look like and again I've never had those conversations or give them out on camera because I think we've seen the outworkings of people doing that in the past week. What we will be coming forward with a number of regulations and recommendations that look about curtailing the spread of Covid in Northern Ireland because there is one thing about Covid, there is nothing certain about it. Our actions depend on how Covid spread, we've had to bring in regulations and restrictions to restrict the movements and the activities of people in Northern Ireland to try to curtail the spread of Covid here.

MARK CARRUTHERS

So just to be clear, you are telling me are you that you are far from comfortable at the prospect of the whole hospitality sector opening up again in two weeks' time?

ROBIN SWANN

What I'm saying, I don't think that it will be possible for hospitality to open up on the 27th the way we knew it, there will be additional recommendations, there will be additional things put in place and that will be worked out between now and the 27th, so I can't give that certainty, I can't give that clarity and I never have.

MARK CARRUTHERS

We heard the Economy Minister on the View on Thursday night, Diane Dodds saying that now we have certainty that businesses can reopen on Friday 27th, what the DUP all along wanted to avoid was a cycle of lockdowns and this will bring it to an end and businesses can be sure that they can reopen in the run up to Christmas. Are you clear that some kind of further intervention will be needed between the end of November and Christmas time?

ROBIN SWANN

Where we're currently sitting at this minute in time there's over 400 inpatients in our hospitals with Covid, to put that into perspective and put that into reality, people hear a number, that's the equivalent of 50 eight bedded wards. That's 58 bedded wards that could be looking after other patients with other conditions, seeing elective care surgery is being put through, we haven't seen the decrease that we would have liked to have seen with the number of inpatients that we currently have in our hospitals. We haven't seen the decrease in the number of positive cases that we would have liked to have seen at this point in time. So do I think further restrictions will be necessary, will be asked for between now and Christmas, yes I do.

MARK CARRUTHERS

Naomi Long said on Thursday evening to my colleague Jayne McCormack that she'd been reconsidering her position in the Executive because the DUP deployed the controversial cross community vote mechanism, you've made it very clear you're very unhappy that the DUP did that twice to block proposals that you brought to the Executive over the past week, if you find yourself in a situation where the DUP tries to veto what you're doing again will you consider your position as Health Minister?

ROBIN SWANN

My position as Health Minister, one thing I've always had by taking on this is a responsibility and a duty, not just to the people of Northern Ireland in making sure that we have the health service that supports them, but also that I stand up and speak for the healthcare workers across the health and social care sector in Northern Ireland and that's what I will continue to do. If it comes to a point where that and I think the position of the Executive, not just me as Health Minister, but the position of the Executive could actually be untenable.

MARK CARRUTHERS

I'm just wondering what is your bottom line in terms of your view if you think you are constantly being undermined by the DUP, by the single biggest party on the Executive and your efforts to keep people safe as you see it are being frustrated by that party, what's your breaking point?

ROBIN SWANN

If I had a breaking point, if I had a bottom line I'm not going to broadcast it now.