ANDREW MARR SHOW
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JON LANSMAN,
FOUNDER, MOMENTUM

AM: Now everyone who’s looked closely at the General Election campaign thinks that an organisation which brought together thousands of young people and many veteran leftists had a huge part to play in Jeremy Corbyn’s relative success. Its very name, Momentum, strikes fear into the heart of centrists or moderate Labour MPs and it is the creation of my next guest. Tony Benn’s one-time organiser, Jon Lansman. Welcome Mr Lansman. Before we start properly just tell us a bit about you. How would you describe your own politics? Would you say you were a revolutionary for instance?

Lansman: Well, no. I don’t think I’d say a revolutionary. I want to transform society into a completely different sort of society.

AM: Radical Socialist would do?

JL: I’m a radical Socialist, absolutely. I want to see a society that treats people as, you know, that has – whose governments design policies that are for the benefit of people, not for profit.

AM: And Momentum has a series of core beliefs, as it were. It’s an ideological organisation. If you sign up to Momentum you sign up to these beliefs. I’m not using ideological in a hostile sense, but for instance you say that you must redistribute wealth and power from the many – from the few to the many.

JL: That is certainly true, but I think most of the people who’ve joined the Labour Party actually come in with very little ideological baggage. You know, they don’t remember you know the Soviet Union. They don’t remember the debates that I was involved in in
the 1980s, you know, when I helped to organise Tony Benn’s campaign.

AM: One of the problems about the 70s and the 80s from the point of view of the Left, is the Left hated each other and they hated other Labour Party members, more sometimes than they seemed to hate the Tories. There was a lot of internal friction. Is that still a problem?

JL: I think there was internal strife and I think we’ve – you know I’ve learnt the lessons that internal strife doesn’t help the Labour Party. I think we saw that in the starting point of the General Election campaign which followed two years of too much strife in the Labour Party after Jeremy Corbyn’s first victory, but I think we’ve put that behind us now at this Conference, in which the party was really united. You know around the programme –

AM: Not this conference?
JL: Well not the one in Manchester. The one in Brighton last week, you know which was really, really healthy and I think we’re now a united party and I don’t think, you know, I don’t think that we can return to that time. You know we, in the General Election campaign we went out and campaigned for candidates right across the political spectrum of the Labour Party.

AM: And now you have organisers up and down the country in constituencies up and down the country trying right at this moment to topple lots of Tory MPs who are here in Manchester. What’s your message to them?

JL: Well, they need to prepare because we’re in their constituencies now. We’re training our canversers (sic) to persuade people on the doorstep, we’re mobilising thousands of people every weekend to go to Tory marginals and unseat Tory MPs.
AM: Let’s return to the politics of it. You talk about a redistribution of wealth and we both know that wealth in this country is concentrated in property and pensions and so forth, and yet so far the Labour Party’s not prepared to talk about a wealth tax. You talk about income tax rises but doesn’t the Labour Party need to address the idea of a wealth tax?

JL: Well I think, you know, we’re at an early stage in the development of the detail of the policy that was presented in the manifesto to the country. That you know it’s the first time in my life that I’ve been knocking on doors and found voters who’ve already read the Labour Party Manifesto and know what’s in it, so it inspired lots of enthusiasm. We’ve got to put more detail in it over the next – between now and the election however long that takes.

AM: The great confrontation, some would say in the modern world, is between as it were politics on the one hand, social democracy on the one hand and the big, big corporations who are reshaping life everywhere, very often avoiding paying taxes and so forth. And to deal with that you need the biggest organisations you can and it’s been the EU who has taken on Google, not the British government.

JL: Well I think the thing about modern capitalism is that global corporations are now so global, so international that they can ride roughshod over not only nation states but even the EU. And you know that is what we’re up against.

AM: So that being so why did you organise at Brighton to stop the Labour Party debating Brexit?

JL: What happened at Brighton was we had lots of debate about Brexit. We knew we were going to have that.
AM: No votes.

JL: There was a vote on the NEC statement which was overwhelmingly carried. There were speeches by Keir Starmer and Emily Thornberry, but you know outside the conference chamber there was lots of debate on the fringes, including at many fringe meetings that we organised ourselves.

AM: So it wasn't just an attempt to avoid embarrassing Jeremy Corbyn? A bit of that?

JL: Well Brexit is not the only thing that is important. You know there were other policies that we wanted to promote. We wanted a discussion about the NHS, which is in crisis. About housing, you know which is the lack of affordable housing is now affecting families right across the social spectrum. About railways. About social care for the elderly. So those were the subjects that we positive promoted and you know there are lots of things that are important to discuss.

AM: One thing that’s important to discuss, you come from a devout and traditional Jewish family yourself. There’s been a lot of conversation about anti-Semitism on the left and in the Labour Party and the Leader of Brighton Council, who’s a Labour man, has said he doesn’t want the Labour Party back in Brighton until it’s sorted out its anti-Semitism problem. As a Jew yourself how do you feel about the mood on parts of the left about Israel and about Jewishness?

JL: Well look, first of all there is a – you know anti-Semitism is a problem throughout society.

AM: And growing probably.

JL: It would be extremely surprising if it wasn’t also present in the Labour Party alongside other you know forms of discrimination, which is why I’m so pleased that the National Executive of the Labour Party put a statement which made very clear our absolute
opposition to all forms of discrimination. Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and so on. And you know it’s incredibly important to me as a Jew. You know my Jewish identity is important to me and actually my reading as a child about the oppression and victimisation of Jews through the centuries, from the Roman Empire to the 20th century, culminating in the Holocaust is what defined by politics so I’m very clearly against any form of anti-Semitism in the party.

AM: And so when you hear people like Ken Loach or McCluskey saying, ‘there’s not really any anti-Semitism in the Labour Party, I’ve never heard an anti-Semitic comment’, do you think there’s a danger or a slight blindness on that subject by some people on the left? They think we’re in the left, we can’t possibly be discriminatory, we can’t possibly be anti-Semitic and they don’t really think about it?

JL: Well I think it is the case that, you know, you have to be a Jew to actually experience anti-Semitism. I have actually experienced anti-Semitism. My children who are only half-Jewish, who are not hieratically Jewish have experienced anti-Semitism, I know that there is a problem with anti-Semitism and it has to be dealt with wherever it is.

AM: It’s a little bit strange having you here in the middle of the Tory Party Conference, I can’t resist a last question. A message for the Prime Minister who will be on sofa shortly.

JL: Well, I would ask her, you know we’ve been talking about abuse, in Activate which is the name of that imitation Momentum in the Tory party one of their activists talked about gassing Chavs. In the context of the appalling disaster at Grenfell Tower I’d like to know what she has to say to those activists.