ANDREW MARR:
This week, we have seen a huge rise in immigration numbers and the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, gently slapping down those who think the EU can be radically reformed. Bad news for Tory strategists. Small wonder perhaps that some are calling for the great missing link of politics himself: Boris Johnson. Are things really that bad? The Conservative Party Chairman Grant Shapps is here. Good morning.

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Good morning.

ANDREW MARR:
Can you kind of show any light on this mystery as to whether Boris Johnson is being summoned back to the colours willingly or unwillingly?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
I mean we all think Boris is a fantastic London mayor and he’s got a lot to offer. He’s
doing a brilliant job in London. His term runs till 2016, so he’s got a little way to go, but no doubt he’ll have many …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Is that sort of code for not welcome before 2016 in the House of Commons?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well what Boris does is up to Boris. We just think he’s got a great contribution. He’s part of what we’re trying to do as a government, which is to make sure that the biggest bust in a hundred years that we saw in that big recession is recovered from and that we end up with families who are better off, with less debt for our children to have to pay back. Now Boris Johnson’s an important part of dealing with that in London and I’m sure he’s got a great future ahead of him.

ANDREW MARR:
Well let me ask you very directly. Would you like to see him play a leading role in the Conservative campaign at the next General Election?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Oh yes, absolutely. You know Boris Johnson is a guy who’s able to communicate incredibly well. Of course it would be crazy for him not to be part of that message because people in this country want to know that you know we are on their side, that we’re dealing with those long-term problems, that we’re making sure that we’re continuing to cut the deficit whilst dealing with the big issues like immigration and welfare.

ANDREW MARR:
And in what capacity do you think?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well campaigning for a majority Conservative Government. I mean one of the things that’s interesting – I think most people would say look this Coalition Government has got on with the big job, which is to reduce the deficit; save the country from going bust and reduce the deficit. What people actually now want – seven, eight out of ten
people say – is a majority government to finish that job off, so that the families in this
country have the security of a pay packet they bring home at the end of the month and
they can bring up their families in the security and knowledge that you know …

ANDREW MARR:
The Workers’ Party?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
… there’s a brighter future. Well certainly the party who are absolutely four square
behind families, who’ve been very pressed in this terrible sort of very lengthy
downturn.

ANDREW MARR:
And in the Workers’ Party it’s been suggested George Osborne would like Boris to be
bound in as an MP so that he is responsible for whatever happens in the election
campaign. Is that fair?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well, look, people watching your programme will be much more interested in what
the Government wants to do to make sure that you know their children don’t end up
having to pay off our debts, our deficit from this generation – more so than which
personality is doing this, that and the other. But I’ll be very clear. I think Boris
Johnson’s got a big future in the party. I want him to be an important part of our
campaign.

ANDREW MARR:
Well let’s leave Boris steaming and huffing behind the scenes for a second and turn to
some big policy issues then. You’ve had a terrible week when it came to the
immigration figures – very embarrassing for a government that’s promising tens of
thousands max and you’re now way, way ahead of where you hoped to be.

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well, look, I don’t agree. First of all, those figures mask the fact that we’ve got
immigration from outside of the EU, the bit that we can most control …
ANDREW MARR:
(over) Twelve thousand is a lot of tens of thousands.

GRANT SCHAPPS:
(over) Well hold on, down to the lowest level since 1998, so this is actually a big improvement and we’ve done that by taking a series of steps to make sure that, for example, those bogus colleges which were offering fake degrees to people have closed down.

ANDREW MARR:
But the raw numbers are going up and up and up.

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well …

ANDREW MARR:
You promised they would go down and down and down. Very straightforward.

GRANT SCHAPPS:
First of all, the pledge is for the end of the Parliament and we’re only part way through. Secondly …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) And is there any chance of hitting that? Any chance at all?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well secondly … Yes we do. Secondly, within Europe the bits that we can start to contribute to, we have. So, for example, we’ve said that you can’t just come here and start claiming benefits. We’re introducing new rules which mean that for the first three months you can’t claim at all. After six months, you have to stop claiming. We’ve tightened up access to housing and to many other public services. I think that’s absolutely right. But of course what you’re pointing at here …

ANDREW MARR:
I’m pointing out you made a very specific pledge as a party and as a government to bring numbers down to tens of thousands. Are you prepared to repeat that pledge now?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well that’s still our goal – to bring the numbers down.

ANDREW MARR:
Is it a promise?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
But let me just make one thing clear. From outside the EU, we’ve made huge progress on this. Within the EU …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) You have no effect at all, you’ve got no control over this really.

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well what’s happened recently is, for example, countries like Spain, Portugal, Italy – the older countries within the EU – those are the citizens who’ve been moving. But we do think that to have further impact, we need to have reform within Europe, and of course that’s why we’re offering a referendum with a renegotiation.

ANDREW MARR:
Which takes us to Angela Merkel who said that she might go some way towards looking at benefit tourism, so-called, but in terms of free movement really wasn’t prepared to move at all. And she made it very clear she is committed to a stronger, more centralized European Union, not a radically changed decentralized one. She’s not somebody who can save your bacon, is she?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
That’s not what I heard actually. I say this. She said very clearly in the press conference that she did with the Prime Minister “Where there’s a will, there’s a way”, and she cited specifically ….
ANDREW MARR:
She also said those who want radical reform “You will be disappointed”, she said.

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well hold on, she cited specifically another area where people said oh it will be impossible. People said it would be impossible for David Cameron to cut the overall EU budget. Guess what, that’s exactly what he achieved. People used to say, by the way, that no British Prime Minister would veto an EU treaty. That’s exactly what our Prime Minister has done. He got us out of that European bailout. So every time people say it’s not possible, you’ll never be able to negotiate that, actually all the history in the last four years with this Prime Minister has been against that. And I thought when Angela Merkel said “Where’s a will, there’s a way”, she was making it very clear that actually she believes in the kind of Europe that has to look outward, where we have to compete with the rest of the world – get rid of the tape. And if we do those things, we’ll be successful, but either way – and here’s the catch – the British people will get a say in an In/Out Referendum but only if they vote Conservative.

ANDREW MARR:
And you need a renegotiated treaty to trigger that. Have you got any supporters inside the EU at all for that, national government for that?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
(over) Well, look, I think the pledge of an In/Out Referendum is something that the British Parliament provides and it can only happen if people vote Conservative. What is then negotiated is down to a process of negotiation. The fact of the matter is the only way to have that In/Out Referendum is to vote Conservative.

ANDREW MARR:
Unless of course the Labour Party changes its policy and decides it will have a referendum.

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well look …
ANDREW MARR:
That may well happen this week.

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Look anyone who believes that the Labour Party is seriously going to go out there and negotiate with Europe – the party which handed away a large chunk of the British rebate for absolutely nothing in return, a party that so mismanaged our immigration system that people were able to come here (in fact we now know through Mandelson) they went out and recruited people to come to this country …

ANDREW MARR:
Okay.

GRANT SCHAPPS:
The idea that the Labour Party is the answer to these problems …

ANDREW MARR:
As opposed to the party which hasn’t been able to control immigration and hasn’t been able to find a single serious ally for renegotiation of the fundamental treaty?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well I just want to challenge this idea that we haven’t been working very hard on immigration. And …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) I’m sure you’ve been working very hard. I’m just saying you haven’t had any effect.

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well that’s not true. We’ve had a third reduction in immigration from outside of the EU – the lowest since 1998. We’ve now put in measures within the EU and of course that’s one of the reasons why we want to negotiate.
ANDREW MARR:
Alright, a very, very simple one then: are you going to get the numbers down dramatically before the General Election – yes or no?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well, look, I very much hope so. And the simple fact of the matter is …

ANDREW MARR:
I hope it’s going to be sunny for the rest of the year, but I can’t guarantee it. What does hope mean in that regard?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well simply that we put in place measures which have yet to show in the figures. So, for example, when I talked about preventing people coming here even from within the EU and immediately claiming welfare, they now can’t do that for the first three months and then have to stop after six months. Those are measures that have been taken, but you’ve yet to see them in the immigration figures. That won’t be till next year.

ANDREW MARR:
So we will see them coming down?

GRANT SCHAPPS:
Well I very much hope so. And, look, I believe that if you care about issues like immigration, reducing welfare and making sure that we continue this recovery so people have the security of a pay packet at the end of the month and a job – let’s not forget we’ve got more jobs in our economy than ever before, more women in work than ever before, meaning security for families – if you care about those things, the only way to deliver it is to vote for a majority Conservative Government and that’s what we’ll be fighting for.

ANDREW MARR:
You got the message across very nicely right at the end. Grant Schapps, thank you very much indeed for that.
INTERVIEW ENDS