AM: Welcome, Chuka.

CU: Good morning, Andrew. Thanks for having me on.

AM: Now, you’re also a Londoner, you’re the kind of person who could have been walking over London Bridge. What do you think went wrong in this case?

CU: Well, our thoughts and prayers of course with the victims and those who were injured. And we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the emergency services. And actually the bravery of ordinary people who intervened in this case. But look, I think people will be waking up this morning and find it rather unedifying that you are seeing the two main parties seeking to use a terrorist incident as a political football in the midst of a general election campaign. And look, let’s consider the facts here.

AM: You may be right, but also people will be wondering did something go wrong in the system and what was that something.

CU: Well, clearly the system needs to be looked at, but the facts are this: the assailant, the person who committed the acts here, was jailed under a regime inherited by the coalition government from a Labour government. And then he was released early under a Conservative government. So this happened under governments of different political persuasions, and the changes that need to be made, frankly, I think the focus has to be on properly funding the Parole Board, properly funding the probation services, and let us remember – I mean, I think the prime minister is being dishonest here because –

AM: We should remind ourselves that those things were cut under the Liberal Democrats when you were part of the coalition.

CU: Like I said, this is why it is ridiculous to try and play political games with this. And let us not forget actually that if this particular individual had been convicted for doing what he did now he would not be released early. He would have to serve at
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least two thirds of his sentence and he would only be released if the Parole Board deemed that he didn’t pose a threat to the public. So I think, let’s draw a line under the silly political games being played with this terrorist incident and just focus on what needs to happen to make sure it doesn’t happen again.

AM: Okay, well let’s draw a line under all of that and turn to the general election campaign itself. Your party is having a fairly torrid time. The cliché would be that you’re going to be crushed from both sides by the two main parties, and that does seem to be happening. Do you think in retrospect it was a mistake to focus so much on revoking Article 50?

CU: No. The third party, as you said, this is my first experience of doing this, being part of the Liberal Democrats at my fourth general election. Always gets squeezed. We are under the current polling winning or in second place in 134 seats. And the public have a choice right now: either you can deliver a blank cheque to Boris Johnson to take us out of the European Union with the hardest of hard Brexits, with us trading on no deal terms with the European Union from the end of next year, or you can ensure that we have parliamentary arithmetic in the new House of Commons to deliver a people’s vote to stop Brexit altogether. That is the stark choice facing people, and in order to deliver the latter, as a starting point you have got to reduce the number of Conservative MPs in the new House of Commons. And we are in a position to take seats, a substantial number of seats, from the Conservatives. Particularly in London and in the southern regions in a way that the Labour Party can’t. And this is an opportunity for the public, because, yes, we’ve got an unfair, undemocratic, first past the post system, but by tactically voting you can override this broken system that we’ve got.

AM: That would make more sense, and if I may say so, be more honourable if the Liberal Democrats were prepared to stand down for pro-leave, pro-remain candidates from the Labour Party in
other seats. There are two seats I can think of, Penistone near Sheffield, and Kensington in London, where if the Liberal Democrat candidate stood down or didn’t campaign a Conservative probably would not win and a pro-referendum Labour candidate would win. And yet you won’t. It’s pure tribalism.

CU: No, look, if anyone is seeking to lay that accusation at the door of one of the main parties I don’t think you can do it to the Liberal Democrats.

AM: So why not stand down?

CU: Andrew, you asked the question, let me answer it. We have been part of a remain alliance arrangement with two other political parties, the Green Party and Plaid. We have stood aside for two leading independent remain candidates, Dominic Grieve, Anna Soubry, in Beconsfield and Broxtowe, No other one of the main parties –

AM: Not Labour.

CU: Labour were approached through Unite to Remain to discuss whether or not – this is in spite, by the way, of the fact that they claim they are not a remain party, they’re not saying they’re a remain or leave party. They were approached to be part of Remain Alliance arrangements, and they refused to engage in the process of talks.

AM: Alright –

CU: But anyway the nomination papers are in now. It is up to voters what happens. And what I am saying is if we want to depress the number of Conservative MPs in the new House of Commons, in Tory Lib Dem marginals where we can take those seats, it is a waste to basically cast your vote for a Labour Party that’s got no hope in hell of winning those seats. And you could say of course we’d say that. Looking at the polls, the Labour Party is not in a position to take seats from the Tories. It’s trying to defend its seats in the west midlands, in Yorkshire and the northeast.
AM: You’re asking people to vote tactically.
CU: Yes.
AM: And to think tactically. So let me ask you about how your party would behave tactically after an election. You no longer say that Jo Swinson’s going to be prime minister, so you have two people there who could be prime minister. You’ve got Jeremy Corbyn and you’ve got Boris Johnson. At some point it’s only honest to tell Liberal Democrat – potential Liberal Democrat voters – which way you would go.
CU: There are two things about that. Remember, first of all both the leaders of the main parties have said no coalitions, no arrangements, not alliances, no pacts.
AM: They say that.
CU: That is completely off the agenda. Jo Swinson is clear we will not facilitate either Jeremy Corbyn or Boris Johnson becoming the prime minister. But hang on –
AM: So who does become prime minister?
CU: Well, in the end the Queen is the one ultimately who will approach –
AM: She can’t be prime minister.
CU: Hang on just a moment. She approaches somebody to form a government. But I don’t know what’s going to happen. I’m not in control. Look, remember –
AM: Okay. Are you seriously suggesting that after coming third in this election the Liberal Democrats are going to be in the position of ordering the Conservative Party or the Labour Party to change their leader?
CU: No. That’s your proposition.
AM: I can’t see what other route there is for you.
CU: Look, hang on just a minute. There are loads of imponderables here. Usually after a general election one of the main parties gets rid of their leader within 48 hours. We don’t know which of those it will be –
AM: But you’re hoping that happens.
CU: - We don’t know what is going to be in the Queen’s Speech. We don’t know who the Queen is going approach to be prime minister. So in that context I can’t predict what will happen. But what I do know is that when you have a hung parliament with a minority government that minority government doesn’t dictate what happens. We have successfully, working on a cross-party basis, stopped Brexit from happening up to now. It was supposed to happen in March. It didn’t then. It was supposed to happen in October, it didn’t then.

AM: You’re going to order one of the other parties to change their leader. It just doesn’t seem likely.

CU: No, look, at the end of the day, say for example we have situation where Boris Johnson is biggest party but a minority government, he will not be in control of what happens in the House of Commons. If he seeks to bring forward his Withdrawal Agreement Act there will have to be a motion, there will have to be legislation, which can be amended from other benches than the government benches to provide for a people’s vote. This is the gift that the British people have in their hands over the next ten days. And if we fail in this we have a living breathing example of the kind of politics that will run roughshod over our country. And that is the politics of Donald Trump, who the prime minister has long said he’s an admirer of, despite the way that he operates, and the similarities between the two are stark. That is what is facing us.

AM: Before we get onto Donald Trump, we’ve run out of time. Chuka Umunna, thanks very much indeed for talking to us.

(ends)