ANDREW MARR SHOW – JOHN McDONNELL, 2nd Sept. 2018

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JOHN McDONNELL, MP
SHADOW CHANCELLOR

AM: Mr McDonnell, you heard Rabbi Sacks there. What’s your response?

JM: I found it quite distressing. I found it quite distressing. But let me thank him at least – let me thank Lord Sacks. He’s been brutally honest and I appreciate that, but let me be equally honest as well. I just think he’s got it wrong. Let me just go through some of the points he made. The accusation about Jeremy Corbyn being anti-Semite and this reference to Enoch Powell is just – it is so wrong and the grounds upon which he made those things – let’s just talk through some of those. First of all he said anti-Semitism is blaming Israel for everything that’s happened in the Middle East. Jeremy has never done that. Let’s look at some of his speeches, his attacks on Iran, on Saudi Arabia, the role of other countries in the Middle East and Iraq as well. And look at what’s happened over the years. 30 odd years that Jeremy’s been campaigning against racism but also on issues in the Middle East itself. He said it’s anti-Semitism to conflate Jews and Zionism. Jeremy specifically distinguished Zionists from the Jewish population itself. There are Jews who are Zionist and there are Jews who are anti-Zionist as well. He also said that Jeremy has supported Hamas and Hezbollah. He’s never done that. Yes, he’s spoken to them on the basis of saying to them honestly this is wrong, the violence is wrong, you need to get round the table and you need to start talking peace. And he also said as well the persecution within the Labour Party, Jeremy has made it absolutely clear we will protect Jewish members of our party from any form of abuse and anti-Semitism and we will take action as well, and that’s what’s happening. So I just say to Lord Sacks you’ve got it wrong. Come and talk to us. If you sat down with
Jeremy Corbyn I believe you would reach a level of agreement that would help us go forward.

AM: So he said he won’t do that until Jeremy Corbyn explicitly apologises and recants and explains himself. Now he’s written newspaper articles, I agree, but he hasn’t actually done that as it were speaking to the country on a camera. The Labour Party Conference is coming up, is this not something that Jeremy Corbyn needs to put to bed personally at the Labour Conference?

JM: I think Jeremy is doing that all the time and he will do in the coming weeks as well, almost certainly. But let me just go back to Lord Sacks. I appeal to him come and sit down with Jeremy because I think when you sit down with Jeremy you will find you are virtually on the same page on many of these issues, that you’ll be able to work together to tackle the issue of anti-Semitism in our society, which we acknowledge exists and we’ve got to tackle together. We can only do that if we talk to one another. I think you’ve just – I’ll just say to Lord Sacks I just think you’ve misinterpreted what’s gone on, I think you’ve got – really have misinterpreted Jeremy. I’ve known him for over 30 years. His whole life has been devoted to anti-racism, to peace and justice. That’s the – come and meet him and you’ll understand that.

AM: If there’s been a misunderstanding it’s partly around Labour’s refusal to accept the full definition or the examples of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of anti-Semitism. This is coming up at the NEC next week. Would you like to see your party accept it in full?

JM: I want to see it resolved. I don’t want to pre-empt the NEC but let me just say from what I’ve heard it will be resolved and there’ll be a balance about acceptance as people want, but also exactly about what others have said as well, and Lord Sacks himself, the freedom of speech is important as well. The ability to
criticise polices that you disagree with but you do it in terms which are acceptable. Now that is exactly –

AM: I’m sorry to jump in, but you’re a big voice in the Labour movement and people will be watching you and listening to you. If you yourself said that you think that definition should be accepted, that would be something that would have an effect. I ask you again. Do you think it should be accepted?

JM: I do not want to interfere in the NEC because anything that you say one way or the other can jeopardise what I think will be historic agreement, and let me put it as straightforwardly as I can. I think all sides will be satisfied with the proposals that will be discussed. That means acceptance on the one hand and at the same time –

AM: Of the full definition?

JM: I think acceptance overall and I think also the commitment to freedom of speech and yes, a recognition of the rights of Palestinians. I think the NEC are wise enough to come to that understanding and then we can get on with the serious business of full engagement with the Jewish community, tackling anti-Semitism in our society and yes, as best we can bringing people together. We’re going to resolve this matter and I hope we’re going to do it quickly and move on.

AM: And will this full definition of anti-Semitism be retrospectively applied or not?

JM: Well, what we hope to do is have a shared understanding of how we go forward because I think what will happen is if the NEC accept a way forward like that then what we’ll need to do is do a real consultation about how you implement all of this. And do that with full engagement of the Jewish community and others to make
sure it’s fair and it’s just to everybody and everybody, just everybody learns lessons from this and we move forward. How do we move forward? We move forward together.

AM: I know you’ve worked with Frank Field a lot over the years, is he a loss to the Labour Party?

JM: Look, Frank’s an old mate of mine, he nominated me for the Labour leadership and now he’s one of the first people I went to to nominate Jeremy on the ballot paper.

AM: I bet he regrets that.

JM: No, I don’t think he does actually. I know he’s resigned and I spoke to him yesterday and he’s been quite angry and concerned about a number of things. I think we can address all those things that he’s concerned about. I think he can continue to make a valuable contribution as a Labour Party member and I want him to come back into the fold. But there’s issues that need to be resolved and we can do that I think constructively and amicably and I think his local constituency want this as well.

AM: As a Constitutional matter, as it were, not personally, do you think when this kind of things happens the MP should stand down as well and create a by election so the voters can choose who they want?

JM: No, I’ve always, I’ve always thought that, but I think with Frank we can have a proper discussion which can overcome some of the problems that he’s identified and we don’t need to go anywhere near that, but I’ve always thought that as a matter of principle whichever party the person is a member of.

AM: He’s not the only one, as you know. There are other Labour MPs thinking about quitting party membership or quitting the
party whip, even before the party conference and today the Jewish Labour Movement where some of them are gathered are holding a conference. What is your message to them today?

JM: The message is I think on the anti-Semitism issue we can resolve this and I think we can resolve this fairly quickly and constructively with good will and working together and I think we can do that. On the other issues where people have said they’re disgruntled on issues of policy, come and see us and talk to us about those policies and at the end of the day democracy will prevail. What we’ve always been in the Labour Party is a broad church and I want to maintain it as such because that’s the way you get the best policies. Look I’ve for 30 years – 20 years I was on the backbenchers, 10 years before that I was campaigning on policy positions which were in a minority. Some are still in a minority, many are in the majority. You can win the argument but you stay within the – well you stay within the team to win that argument.

AM: Over the summer there’s been a steady increasing drumbeat of support for this idea of a second referendum or the Peoples’ Vote. What would have to change for you to support that?

JM: Well, let me just run with the position so everyone’s clear on what our position is. Labour Party policy is not in favour of a second referendum. That’s the policy position. But what we’ve said is we’ll see what comes back and now we’re back in parliament we’ll see what comes back from Theresa May’s negotiations. We’re opposed to a no deal situation and we’ll work towards a proper constructive negotiation. Our view, if we – my view is I can’t see this government achieving anything that will be of benefit to the long term prospects of our economy and for jobs.

AM: In which case give the people another chance to vote on it.
JM: Well I think we should go – my preference is a General Election because then you vote on the issues and you vote on the team that will then do the negotiations. If she won’t go for a General Election well we’ll keep all options on the table and then we’ll see what happens in well, in October, November.

Ends