ANDREW MARR SHOW, 3rd DECEMBER, 2017

ALAN MILBURN
Chair, Social Mobility Commission 2012-17

AM: A little earlier I spoke to Mr Milburn and I began by asking, obviously, why he’d quit.

Milburn: For the last ten years or so in various social mobility roles, I’ve served a Labour Prime Minister, a Coalition Prime Minister and now a Conservative one. And I’ve done so because I care deeply about the issue and I believe that it matters profoundly to the country. I’ve reached the conclusion, sadly, that with the current government there is little, if any hope, of progress being made towards the fairer Britain that the Prime Minister’s talked about. The government, probably for understandable reasons, is focused on Brexit and seems to lack the bandwidth to be able to translate the rhetoric of healing social division and promoting social justice into reality. So I’m afraid I reached the conclusion that there’s only so long that you go on pushing water uphill.

AM: These are areas of desperate deprivation around the country where people are stuck and angry. Theresa May has only had 18 months as Prime Minister, she came in saying that she would correct burning injustices. Are you saying that she’s simply unable to do that?

M: No, look, the Prime Minister, I’ve got no doubt has a personal commitment to social justice. She has championed quite unfashionable causes in her time. Modern slavery, for example. But what is lacking here is meaningful political action to translate very good words into deeds. In the end what counts in politics is not what you talk about, it’s what you do and I’m afraid the
divisions in Britain are becoming wider. They’re becoming wider economically, socially and geographically.

AM: So to be specific you had ideas, you had proposals, places to spend money and you couldn’t get any traction in government. No one was listening to you.

M: Well it’s not that no one was listening. Justine Greening, who will be on your programme later today for example is a champion for the cause and I know wanted to secure my reappointment as Chair for the Commission. She failed in doing so and I’ve decided I’m not going to reapply for the job and frankly, neither are the other three Commissioners. So the issue here is not about the words. It’s easy to talk the language of social justice and healing social division, what counts is whether or not that is being translated into practice. And look, the Chancellor in his budget just a week or so ago confirmed that we’re going to have 20 years of real earnings being frozen – that’s quite unprecedented. We’re not making the progress that we should to address these deep divides on the labour market, the housing market or indeed in our education system.

AM: Some people will say no surprise here, here is a former Labour minister, never a fan of the Tories, working under a Tory Prime Minister, he’s not been reappointed and he’s going and he’s kicking her as he goes out the door.

M: Yes, of course, people will say that sort of thing, but frankly it’s a bit pathetic. I’ve worked for Labour, Coalition, Conservative Prime Ministers. The Commission is cross party, it’s non-partisan, it’s entirely independent. We’ve tried to change the terms of the political debate in the country and I think that we have. What is needed, however, is really clear leadership to translate perfectly good words into actions that will make a difference.
AM: And the Prime Minister is not providing that leadership?

M: At the moment, no.

AM: Can I ask you about Jeremy Corbyn, another leader, because here is somebody who has come up with much stronger proposals in some of these areas than the Blair years offered us. He has got very strong proposals and spending money on wages, on social mobility, on education, on welfare. Isn’t he the answer?

M: I don’t think he is the answer, personally. I think at the moment our politics are deeply polarised. I think they’re polarised between on the one hand the vision of a more nationalist Britain with Brexit taking place and on the other hand you’ve got a vision of a rather statist Britain under Mr Corbyn.

AM: You sound a little bit like a centrist dad at this point. Are you about to launch the Centrist Dad’s Party?

M: Absolutely not.

AM: Can I turn to one other area around this which is the effects of not doing enough for these people. Not doing enough for the areas of social deprivation. You have said there’s a lot of anger in the country. What is ignoring this issue, continuing to ignore this issue, going to do to our politics generally?

M: I think it’s been deeply corrosive of our cohesion as a nation, that we’ve got this growing sense of becoming an ‘us and them’ society. Now just last week the Commission produced a report highlighting the 65 parts of the country that have got the worst social mobility prospects for decent jobs, good schooling, getting on the housing ladder. Of those 65 areas only 5 voted to remain in the European Union in a referendum last year, so there is a burning sense of social resentment and political alienation in the
country. The social divides unfortunately are now being paralleled by a political polarisation in the country. That isn’t good for our sense of being a united kingdom rather than a never more divided one.

AM: And for the time being those people who have been cut out of the fairer society, who have been pushed to one side are still cut out, still pushed out?

M: Yes, and it’s very easy if you are anti-Brexit. I think it’s not a great idea to go ahead with Brexit. I voted to remain. It’s very easy to rail against the people in those areas who voted for it. What we’ve got to do is understand the reasons that people voted as they did for this. It’s fine to be tough on Brexit, but you’ve got to be tough on the causes on Brexit as well and that means that you’ve got to deal with these issues of these areas that are being left behind economically and being hollowed out socially and I’m afraid that isn’t happening with great enough ambition, great enough scale and great enough pace.

Ends