ANDREW MARR SHOW, 4TH SEPT 2016

ED BALLS

AM: I think shock and trauma was what Yvette Cooper, your wife, said about your reaction to watching the thing back.

EB: I hope it’s not veering out of control but it was pretty traumatic watching that. I’m not sure whether I was more traumatised by my dad’s moves, which look rather more kind of – kind of dad-like than I expected. Or, the pictures of me with all these sparkling celebrities and me looking like the guy who’s about to serve them the drinks in this bowtie. It was –

AM: Yes, you’re more formally dressed than the rest.
EB: I was a bit more formally dressed.
AM: But at least you had slimmed down dramatically for the event.

EB: Well, I’m expecting to slim down dramatically over the next few weeks.
AM: Oh really? It’s going to be an on air slimming process.
EB: Look, I could have decided to spend the last month and a half slimming and dance practising, but that wouldn’t be consistent with the spirit of the show, isn’t it? I think you’ve got to go in as you as, which for me is slightly overweight with no dancing ability at all and then hope that Katya, my fabulous partner, is going to wreak a transformation. We’ll see.

AM: So here’s the question my editor really wanted to ask. Can you dance?
EB: Well, I can line-dance with pensioners on political visits, but that’s not quite right. I did waltz when I was 20, but that is now 20 years ago. I can sort of jive but it turns out that they think jiving means wiggling your legs and I can’t do that bit, and my
hips don’t move in the way you would need to for Latin. But you know.
AM: Lots to learn, lots to learn.
EB: Exactly. I mean look, maybe I will emerge from my chrysalis. But – or it may turn out that I was a slug all along.

AM: Yes – I’m just trying to get that image out of my head. I suppose the serious point of all of this is that once you have been on one these shows it sticks in people’s minds and they can’t not see it. It’s there for good. I’m thinking of George Galloway and his green catsuit on, whatever it was.

EB: Well I will never forget you in your leathers and chains dancing on a Friday night.
AM: Thank you so much for that.
EB: A few years back.
AM: I thought that might come up, yeah. But this is not something that is – it’s not easy to do as a sort of serious politician and then go back into politics without being ribbed for it mercilessly, forever.

EB: If I was trying to go back into politics I don’t think I would be doing something so far out of my comfort zone where clearly I don’t start with any ability at all. It’s fun, I’ll get fit. It’s good for people to see that politicians are also human beings. If they wanted me back in politics I’d go back, but frankly I don’t think I’m the answer at the moment to the problems the country’s facing. That’s just the truth.

AM: We’re going to come onto that, because you’ve written a very interesting book, ‘Speaking Out’ which is very open about all sorts of things. The thing that interested me most about it I think probably was you give a long list – ling list – a long list of mistakes that you and others have made about Brexit and about all sorts of
big political decisions and you ask the question, how could politicians avoid making so many mistakes? Is it because you’re always just talking in a small group of people and there’s a kind of consensual bubble you’re inside? What’s your answer to it?

EB: Well I wrote the book to my 27-year-old self to say, you know, if you’re preparing for politics here’s some things you should take on board at the beginning. Took me 20 years to learn them. I also was writing for my mother-in-law to say here’s why we did all this crazy stuff for the last 20 years. I guess the answer to your question is that there are some things which turn out to be mistakes which you don’t know at the time, but there’s other things where you can see the mistake is happening and it takes leadership and strength to step in and solve it, and sometimes in politics that doesn’t happen. I have a feeling Theresa May may be making a mistake at the moment. If you think at the moment she’s not defined her position on Brexit, she’s allowing expectations of an early move on Article 50, she’s got all of these politicians, Johnson, Davis, Fox, all going off in different directions, it feels like a bit of a car crash. My advice to her would be, you’ve got to get a grip on this and do it quickly. Maybe she will in your interview in a few moments, but if this drifts for a month or two it feels like one of those mistakes which needs to be solved now rather than allowing to drift long. There’d be lots of those examples in my book where we let things drift and that was a mistake.

AM: One of the interesting things you say in the book is that Cabinets are really boring. Not much happens in Cabinets, a dreary time of the week. Is it that politicians don’t allow themselves to be challenged hard enough on their ideas when they’re actually in the job?
EB: I think it’s a great honour to be in a Cabinet and you do feel that you are, you know, in a very privileged position round that table. There are moments of crisis where I’m sure the Cabinet is hugely important, but it often felt to me like the biggest issue of the day wasn’t the thing being discussed on that agenda, that was happening outside of the Cabinet Room. If you wanted to solve a problem or build a consensus with colleagues that tended to happen outside the meeting. Now it may be very hard in modern politics to use such a big meeting to go through the hardest issues, but I think it’s a good thing if you can have that kind of discussion and in my experience I’m not sure that’s happened in Cabinet governments for a while. If you go back to the late 60s when Wilson was having votes in his Cabinet, my gosh, that’s, you know, it would be ...

AM: ...You’re very, very tough on Jeremy Corbyn in this book and pretty tough on Ed Miliband as well. Indeed you yolk them together in one sentence as kind of left-wingers who thought the Labour Party could win by being further and further to the left. Wasn’t the great mistake from the point of view of people in your position the £3 membership and changing the rules to allow the Labour Party this huge new left wing membership? That was on your watch and on Ed Miliband’s watch and that has changed the Labour Party and in the view of some Labour moderates destroyed the Labour Party.

EB: Well the great irony is that the pressure for the £3 membership and to have supporters wasn’t coming from the left, it was actually coming from the right. It was supporters of Tony Blair who thought those people who wouldn’t want to a join a party but would support would shift things towards the centre ground and actually that reform was backed by people who supported Ed Miliband and supported David Miliband. In retrospect it was a catastrophic mistake, definitely.
AM: The law of unexpected consequences. Did you argue against it at the time, did you see it coming?

EB: I said to Ed that I was very worried about these changes, but frankly a process had gone on which people like me where not involved in. We were told that actually this was necessary. I didn’t foresee how bad it would be, but I knew enough about Labour history to be worried and the outcome has been much worse than I expected.

AM: You say how bad it could be, but this has allowed lots and lots of relatively young people who are idealistic have a view about changing politics dramatically to come in and play inside the system.

EB: Sure. Look, if Jeremy Corbyn – Jeremy has brought in lots of new members –
AM: Which is a good thing.
EB: That’s a really good thing. But if the consequence was that Labour was winning the argument and that was leading in the polls, that would be – you know then I would have to praise it. But actually that isn’t how things are turning out and I’m afraid what I see is too many times when people say this isn’t working, we’re not going to appeal to centre ground voters, what happens is you get attacked as a neo-Liberal or a Tory. Somebody like me, I was in Labour for 20 years, I’m not a Tory. I just don’t agree with some of the things Jeremy Corbyn advocates on economics or security policy.

AM: Let’s play a kind of thought experiment, but not an outrageous one. Jeremy Corbyn wins again, wins big, stays as Labour Leader. Let’s assume for the sake of argument that you or somebody you know is in the House of Commons still. How would
you behave? You could just say, okay it’s over, there’s been two elections, Jeremy Corbyn has won both of them, it’s time to end the feud, come back into the Shadow Cabinet if you’re invited and try and make it work as best we can. Or, sit on the back benches and sulk for four years and wait to be deselected. Or possibly try to set up a new party because there is the left and there is the Conservative Party and a lot of people feel there’s a huge gap now in the middle and nobody really speaking for them. What do you do?

EB: Well, the country is crying out for a serious opposition which can take on Theresa May. There’s no doubt about that. I – in the Leadership election I’m voting for Owen Smith, but of course the result will be the result. That has to be accepted and then debated.

AM: Would you say to Labour people still in the House of Commons who might be invited by Jeremy Corbyn to bury the hatchet and come back into the Shadow Cabinet and try and make it work? That that is the responsible thing to do?

EB: It is clear that there’s a fundamental problem in the relationship between Jeremy Corbyn and the Parliamentary Labour Party. I think it is likely the Parliamentary Labour Party will want to have elections for the Shadow Cabinet, and in those circumstances I absolutely think senior people need to stand for election and serve as part of the Labour opposition. The third option you raise was the idea of a split. I think that would be a catastrophe for Labour. We have a long history, we have tradition, we have values. As I say in the book, whether it’s about fighting your case in Europe or as an individual politician, walking away from the table is never a good idea. You should stay and fight for what you believe in and it’s really hard and we need a tough opposition and a good opposition. My colleagues need to stay in and do their bit
to make sure that Labour at the next election can appeal to sceptical centre ground voters and say, trust us, not the Conservatives.

AM: Ed Balls, much more to talk about. We’ll be talking later on but for now thank you very much indeed.

ENDS