ANDREW MARR SHOW, 5TH JANUARY, 2020
SIR KEIR STARMER, MP
Shadow Brexit Secretary

AM: Let's start with where I left Jess Phillips, as it were, which is the party’s Brexit policy going forward. If you become Labour leader, the most important thing in a way is how you approach this whole Brexit business. Is it done and dusted, is it over or do you want us to return to the EU?

KS: Well Andrew, we are going to leave the EU in the next few weeks and it’s important for all of us, including myself, to recognise that the argument about leave and remain goes with it. We are leaving. We will have left the EU.

AM: And that’s it?

KS: And this election blew away the argument for a second referendum, rightly or wrongly, and we have to adjust to that situation. The argument has to move on and the argument now is, can we insist on that close relationship with the EU, close economic relationship, but collaboration in other areas? And also what is the framework now for future trade relations? Because my concern is less about technical membership of the EU now, it’s if we shift our focus from the EU and move away from those standards and arrangements, it is inevitable that Boris Johnson and his government will look to America for a trade deal and we need to know the terms of that because we’ve had a lot of discussion about the NHS being part of those negotiations, but all public services could be part of those negotiations. So the argument has to move on and we, the Labour Party need to accept that leave/remain, that divide, goes in a few weeks’ time and we need to focus on what comes next.

AM: There’s no doubt that the party position that you helped frame and create was catastrophic in leave seats in the Midlands and the north of England. You lost a whole swath of seats and in all the groups that support you in the Labour Party the one group
that doesn’t is Labour leave voters. What part of that policy now looking back do you think was wrong?

KS: Well Andrew, we, this question of why we lost is a central question. We’ve now lost four elections in a row, four elections in a row, and I went to 44 constituencies in this general election and all of the teams I was talking to of course were asking me and I was asking them, well what are the issues coming up on the doors? And the issues, there were many of them, but they were the leadership. Rightly or wrongly, fairly or unfairly, was coming up everywhere. The Brexit position and whether we were persuading people. More importantly, whether we were knocking down the Tories claim that they would get Brexit done. Anti-Semitism came up as a question of values and competence and there was a general feeling that the manifesto was overloaded. They were the four main reasons. I went to Leigh last week to have a sort of debrief with activists and members there to say what did you feel here and they came up with even more reasons. Cumulatively, cumulatively, we lost the public’s trust in the Labour Party as a force for good and a force for change. And after four general election losses we have to address that straight away. Because if we lose the next general election that will be the longest period of Labour out of office since the Second World War at a period when we absolutely need a radical Labour government.

AM: Now you say we failed in this way and we failed in that, ‘we’ includes you on Brexit policy specifically. So I ask again, which bits of the policy that you created looking back now you feel you got wrong?

KS: Well Andrew, we didn’t persuade on our policy. I thought that we should have taken a stronger position one way or the other and I argued for it. I lost that argument but I accepted the result. But we didn’t, my central -

AM: But more remain would have been even worse, wouldn’t it?

KS: My, my - I think that clarity about what your position is and not being able to say, well would you be leave or remain after a
general election was a problem. And I made that argument. But I accepted the decision –
AM: Just picking up on that, do you think you would have won this election or done much better had you gone into the election as a clearly remain party?
KS: I think people wanted clarity and they wanted leadership. But I actually – what was coming up on the doorsteps and what the teams were telling me and my own experience was not so much people saying to me I don't much like Labour’s position, but they had bought the idea that if you voted Tory you’d get Brexit done. And we didn’t knock it down hard enough in the election. And I’d have liked the opportunity to knock it down hard because that was what was coming back. People were saying to us, ah, this will get Brexit done. We hadn’t destroyed and wrestled that phrase to the ground.

AM: When I interviewed John McDonnell just after the defeat I said to him nobody seems to be taking responsibility for the defeat. And he said, no, no it’s on me. I take responsibility. It’s my defeat. I own it. Can you say the same thing?
KS: We all have to take responsibility for this. It’s a devastating result for the Labour Party, for Labour MPs, really good MPs who have not been returned, candidates who should have been Labour MPs. But for the millions of people who desperately needed change at that general election, they still need that change but they’re not now going to get it. So it’s devastating, it’s beyond sorry, it’s devastating.

AM: Let’s turn to the here and now absolutely, the Soleimani killing by the Americans. You’ve written in the Sunday Mirror today saying that the government should be holding President Trump to account. What does holding President Trump to account in practice mean?
KS: Not blindly following the Americans, down -
AM: But they’re not.
KS: Well I saw your interview with Dominic Raab and I’ve seen these previous interviews this morning. They are blindly following the Americans. When you pressed him on whether this was lawful and proportionate he didn’t have an adequate answer. Now of course Soleimani is a dangerous man, is a dangerous man, but we have the unilateral act of an irrational and erratic President and a President of America with no coherent Middle East strategy and we cannot blindly follow the Americans into what could well turn out to be a war in the Middle East. We’ve done this before and it’s the wrong place to go.

AM: That is a very interesting commentary but if you were Sir Keir Starmer Prime Minister what would you actually in physical and literal terms be doing differently now?

KS: Assuring myself about the legality. That’s the first thing that has to be done. Is what’s happened lawful or not? And simply saying, as Dominic Raab has done, well he was a regional menace. He was a regional menace, but Dominic Raab knows that strong enough. They should be pressing the Americans on that, making sure that there’s a viable case for what happens next. But we have to make sure. I mean as you said in your introduction this could be the first act of a war or at the very least lead to retaliation on a wide scale. This is a very serious situation and unquestionably blindly following Americans is in my view the wrong thing to do.

AM: Trying to sort of gauge what kind of a leader you would be, can I ask you would you ever support military action if you were the Labour Leader in the House of Commons?

KS: I would pass legislation that said military action could be taken if first the lawful case for it was made, secondly there was a viable objective and thirdly you got the consent of the Commons. I think that piece of legislation is much needed. But they would be the tests and it’s obvious from those tests that there might be circumstances in which they could be met. But the mistake here is
as I say is to go into - we did this in 2003 and it was a big mistake. We mustn’t make that mistake again. This could be even worse and we have the opportunity now to say no, this is not the right way to go.

AM: You said earlier on, you implied earlier on you thought there was too much in the manifesto and I’m very interested in what a Keir Starmer manifesto might look like. Would you for instance go for all those re-nationalisations the Labour Party committed itself to this last year?

KS: Well in some cases the nationalisation argument makes itself in relation to rail. You don’t have to travel for very long to be persuaded of that argument. Or in my old field of criminal justice, where frankly privatisation has caused so many problems that nobody would –

AM: That leaves water, energy, mail, you know?

KS: What I’m really concerned about is this. That the manifesto we need to be discussing now is not the 2019 manifesto, it’s the 2024 manifesto. And that has to address the issues of the late 2020s and the 2030s. And we need to be working on that manifesto straight away. It needs to be credible, it needs to be radical. But picking over the last manifesto is not the job in hand. The job in hand is to write and start writing that 2024 manifesto.

AM: If you look at the overall shape of the next manifesto then, would it be like this manifesto for a much bigger state? Would it involve substantially higher taxes on the richest people in the country in order to rebuild the welfare state? What sort of overall shape of it?

KS: Well, let me deal with that because I’ve never bought into this argument that the private sector is good and delivers the wealth and the public sector spends it. Everybody in business knows, and I want good businesses to succeed, that they can only succeed if you’ve got a strong public sector; roads, schools, all the
infrastructure you need around businesses. So this idea that private-good, public-bad is wrong. But on the role of the state, I do believe that it’s legitimate and right for a government to set the parameters for good businesses. So let me give you some examples of that. One of the problems for businesses is that we’ve got short term investment, not long term investment. It is the role of the government to adjust that and make sure that we have long term investment. Equally, with the green economy, it’s really important that the private sector and government set targets together and requirements together, so I don’t -

AM: I’ll ask you one more specific: would you like to see the private education, the private schools, kind of pushed into the state system so that they cease to exist as private schools?
KS: I would like to see private schools as an irrelevance because the state sector was so good. And we’ve underfunded the state sector. And where you’ve got brilliant schools, you can do that. In Camden, in my constituency, the primary schools are so good that actually few people send their children to private school, the public, the state schools are so good that few people send their children to private schools.

AM: One last question if I may. You had a very vivid phrase: ‘we must not over-steer,’ you said, as a result of this. In other words, we must keep to the left. For an awful lot of people that is a kind of slightly complacent way of not really taking the message of the voters in this election seriously.
KS: Andrew, across the country there is hard-wired inequality of almost every sort: wealth, power, health, regional. And we need fundamental change to deal with that. We needed it in the general election, we still need it now. And to retreat, to retreat –
AM: But you were hammered in the election. What did you learn from that?
KS: To retreat from that is a mistake. What Jeremy Corbyn brought to the Labour Party in 2015 was the stance of saying we
should be anti-austerity, we should be pro-public services. That is right. We don’t want to throw that away. Now, I’m not pretending that we keep everything as it is, I’m not pretending that there was anything good about that general election result. It was devastating. But we shouldn’t retreat from the radical, fundamental change is needed in this country and we must deliver it.

AM: And we have run out of time. Thanks very much indeed for talking to us this morning.
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