

Sir KEIR STARMER MP

THE ANDREW MARR SHOW

5TH APRIL 2020

Sir KEIR STARMER MP, Labour Leader

(Rough transcript, check against delivery)

AM: Keir Starmer, Labour's Brexit spokesman under Jeremy Corbyn, Director of Public Prosecutions before he entered parliament, was always the favourite in the Labour leadership contest. But his 56 per cent round one victory was more convincing than many of his supporters had expected. How is he going to play it? He's with me now.

KS: Good morning.

AM: Welcome, Keir Starmer, and congratulations. Now, no one sensible would claim that this is an easy thing for the government to deal with. Could I ask you first of all how you think overall the government have dealt with this crisis?

KS: I think this would be difficult for any government. I do think there have been mistakes along the way. I think the whole approach to start with, the herd immunity approach, was probably wrong. I know there's a dispute about –

AM: Matt Hancock says it never happened.

KS: No, I understand that, and I don't think at this stage picking over that is particularly helpful. But we were then slow in testing, the equipment that's needed on the frontline isn't there. But I want to be very, very clear that I'm going to engage constructively with the government. I spoke to the prime minister yesterday and said to him that I mean what I say about constructive engagement. We've all got a duty here to save lives and protect our country. And the Labour Party under my leadership will ask difficult questions but only for the purpose of pointing out mistakes so they can be put right. So that's the approach I'm going to take. Constructive engagement, working – and having the courage to say the government's got it right when the government has got it right.

AM: He's inviting you in for talks and to give you information. If he went further and said would you, in effect, be part of a temporary national government during this crisis, as Clem Attlee joined Churchill before the war, what would you do?

KS: Well, the prime minister wrote to me yesterday to say would I come to a meeting with him and the experts later this week, and I told him on the phone yesterday I would. I also asked him whether I could have Privy Council briefings on a one to one with the experts and politicians. He said yes to that. And when I leave this studio I'm going to one of those Privy Council briefings. So the prime minister and I have agreed arrangements for how we will work together in the coming weeks, and those are the arrangements.

AM: And you don't think any further move towards some kind of national government is feasible or likely?

KS: Well, I've agreed those arrangements with the prime minister, and I do think getting the balance right is important here. We've got to be constructive. We've got to pull together, support the government where it's right to do so. But asking those difficult questions matters. You can see than when the difficult questions were asked on testing things began to move. Same thing with equipment on the frontline. So scrutiny is important here. Because if scrutiny points out mistakes that can then be put right it's achieved a very important thing going forward. But not opposition for opposition's sake. I'm not going to score party political points and I won't demand the impossible, which is very easy to do at a time like now.

AM: If you were asked to join a national government would you?

KS: Well, at the moment I've set up arrangements with the prime minister that he and I have agreed, and we will work to those arrangements in the coming weeks.

AM: Some people might say you've already politicised this a bit by pointing out the mistakes the government are making.

KS: I don't think that's right. I think I've pointed out mistakes for the purpose of ensuring that they're put right. Matt Hancock, in the last few days, set out a response on testing. It's welcome, it's the right thing. And I think my job now – the Labour Party's job – is to help them in delivering that. Of course he's set himself a target for the end of April. We shouldn't stand here carping, we should say what can we do to help you get to that. And that's the approach I will take.

AM: Well, let's turn to some specific measures, because Matt Hancock and others have said that if things don't go as well as the hoped this weekend and the week ahead, if people don't abide by all those new restrictions, then further restrictions will have to come in. Matt Hancock suggested that for instance it might be the case the government banned all outside exercise, outside people's homes. If that happened, would Labour support that?

KS: Yes, we would. We do have to take whatever steps are necessary. Social distancing, staying indoors is really difficult for people, is particularly difficult if you don't have a garden, if you're in a flat. And I know there are many people in overcrowded accommodation, but we've got to get through this. And every time people break the guidance from government they put other people at risk, because if the health service can't cope people will die. And you can see that that's happening every day. So I know it's tough, I know it's difficult. We are all missing each other. We realise how much social contact matters. But I would support the government in this, if that's what they decide to do.

AM: What about closing down all non-essential workplaces?

KS: Again, if that is necessary in order to save lives, then we have to do it. But the focus has to be what is necessary to reduce the number of deaths? And we look at the numbers of deaths, but every single one is a family absolutely shattered by a death and

not even able to carry a funeral. So we have to take whatever steps are necessary.

AM: These are really difficult judgements. Already quite a lot of people are saying the police are going too far, being a bit draconian, kicking over barbecues and so forth. You were a human rights lawyer before you came into politics. I wonder, with that perspective, do you agree with them or do you have some sympathy?

KS: Well, there are some examples, I think, of where people think the police went too. But by and large I think the police are getting this right. It's a difficult one to judge. Across the country they're getting it right. The best way is cajole people, to advise people, to persuade people to do the right thing. But I'm really struck by the fact that although there are examples of people not following the government advice, the vast majority of people are following that advice and we should say thank you to them and make sure that everybody's following the advice.

AM: We're going to go through some unbearably grim weeks, I think, ahead. We hit the peak, according Neil Ferguson, in around ten days or so, and then we don't know how long that peak goes on. It's going to be really tough. After all of that we have to come out of this. And the real question, can we talk about how we come out of that, how we unwind from this and what your thinking is about that?

KS: Well, we do need an exit strategy, and one of the things I've said today is the government needs to publish its exit strategy. People want to know how does this end. It seems to me it's a combination of testing and a vaccine. And what I've said to the government is we'll support you in the testing, of course, get that number up to the 100,000. For the vaccine we wish god speed to the scientists, but the government needs a plan, because once the vaccine arrives we don't then want delay. It's going to have to be rolled out across the country. We need priorities, we need a plan.

I think that's the exit strategy. One thing I asked the prime minister yesterday was a Privy Council briefing with the experts so that I can hear first hand from them, and that's what I'm going to do when I leave this studio. So I'll have a better idea after that, but I think it's testing and it's vaccine.

AM: I suppose the problem with waiting for a vaccine is it could be 12 to 18 months away, and by that stage people will no longer tolerate being locked inside their houses.

KS: Well, as I understand it – and I haven't spoken to the experts but I have spoken to some other experts during the last week or two – it might be possible for a vaccine to come earlier than 12 to 18 months, but the 12 to 18 months includes a rollout of it and making sure you're –

AM: Open vaccination centres in every town up and down the country ahead of time, so that when it arrives everybody'll get the vaccine.

KS: Yeah, what we don't want is to have a vaccine to arrive in six or nine months, if it does, and I hope it does, and then the government starts thinking about how it's going to roll it out. What we need is as soon as it arrives there's a plan to roll it out so that everybody can have it, but with priorities for those on the frontline. And that's what I'm pushing the government for, and again I'll work with the government on that.

AM: Let me ask you about another exit strategy. Clearly, we know we've left the EU, but as things stand we're supposed to finish the talks about our trade relationship on a hard deadline at the end of this year. Given that how want that I assume, and everybody wants the government to be really focused on the coronavirus, is that deadline any longer sensible?

KS: Well, the government says it can keep to it, but I think it's unlikely. But at the moment the focus for the government, and the opposition, has to be on the coronavirus and making sure we've put in place the right response and save lives and protect the

country. Whether the government was wise to put a hard deadline on the negotiations and to write it into law is another matter. But I've always said I think that that 12 months is going to be very, very tight. I think the government made a mistake putting dates into the legislation. It's nearly always a mistake to put dates into legislation because you don't know what's going to happen. So the government passes a law saying it's going-

AM: Should they extend it now?

KS: Well, they should extend it if it's necessary to do so.

AM: Okay. Let's turn to the Labour Party and your victory. You've won a victory not only for yourself but in the NEC as well, which gives you a little bit more power. You are later on today going to announce a new Shadow Cabinet. Would it be a Shadow Cabinet broadly like the current one, or would it straddle bit of the party that had been left behind during the Corbyn years?

KS: Well, I'm not going to go into individual names.

AM: I'm not asking you for names.

KS: It will be balanced across the party. It will be balanced across the country. And of course it'll be balanced in terms of diversity.

AM: Will you bring in some of the so-called Blairites or people who are on that wing of the party into your Shadow Cabinet?

KS: I will have in my Shadow Cabinet those that want to serve towards the future aim of winning that next general election. It will be a talented and balanced Shadow Cabinet. But what I felt yesterday very strongly was our party coming together and focusing on the future, and I think that's what matters. We're not looking back, we're not badging people by the past. We're going forward to the future, focusing on how we win the 2024 general election.

AM: You said that where we have to rethink we will rethink.

KS: Yes.

AM: Where have to change we will have to change. Give me some examples of where you're going to rethink and change.

KS: Well, the first example would be our approach to the Jewish communities.

AM: Did that poison up by the roots. What in practise does that mean?

KS: Well, Andrew, the first thing I did in my acceptance speech, my first opportunity as leader of the Labour Party, was to apologise on behalf of the Labour Party. Now, I didn't do that to win votes, I did that because it was a value statement, a matter of principle. And then I spent yesterday afternoon making a number of calls, reaching out to leaders in the Jewish community, to demonstrate that I want to rebuild the trust that we have rebuild. It's going to be a long road, it's going to take a lot of hard work, but I hope I put in at least the first steps yesterday.

AM: And how will we judge whether you've been successful?

KS: Well, they will judge it by the return of Jewish members to our party. When Louise Ellmann left our party, I had a discussion with her two days later and I said to her the test for me of whether we've dealt with this in the Labour Party is when people like you, Louise, feel that you can come back to our party. So I will judge it not in numbers, but do people feel comfortable coming back to our party and other people who felt they can't support us. So that will be my test.

AM: Do you need a new General Secretary to do that?

KS: Well, I'm not going to discuss senior staffing positions. What I need is a party – staff, MPs, members, trade unions – pulling together and saying that we are focused on winning the next General Election.

AM: But you also need to show a change of direction.

KS: Well, we've just lost four elections in a row and therefore of course we need to change. If we don't change we will lose the

next General Election. We obviously face a completely different world now to the one even in December of last year with Coronavirus and so there are huge issues for all political parties.

AM: Let me ask you about that completely different world because we now have a Conservative government spending huge amounts of money through this crisis trying to support the economy in ways which we would never have expected a Labour government to do. This is an entirely new situation going forward. How do you think this huge amount of money should be eventually repaid and by whom?

KS: Well it is going to be a completely different future and what we can't do is go back to business as usual. We now know who the key workers really are and they very often have been overlooked, underpaid and there's going to be a change. They were last and now they've got to be first. We've got to look at funding. The NHS has struggled for funding over the last ten years, so that's got to be looked at and we have to think about how we reimagine the economy going forward. Now I'm not going to pretend I've got all the answers.

AM: And rebalance it as well.

KS: Rebalance it of course. We don't know what the final figures will be but what we can't do is simply make the mistake that we made in 2010 and go for another decade of austerity. We've seen what that has done to the country, we cannot go down that route.

AM: And John McDonnell, the outgoing Shadow Chancellor has said that the rich and big corporations and multinationals should be taxed more to pay for what's being spent at the moment. Do you agree with that?

KS: Well that's what he said into the December election and I think it is inevitable that we have to ask those that have more to pay more. The truth is at the moment we don't yet know how big this challenge is going to be until we're through this crisis, but when we are through there's going to have to be a reckoning.

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We're going to have to do things differently. We're going to have to build a better future.

AM: Jeremy Corbyn said that he'd been vindicated by this. Do you agree?

KS: I don't think that this is about vindicating Labour Party policies. The country wants to see politicians and political parties pulling together to face Coronavirus. Not claiming victory over arguments or otherwise and that's what I will do. I will work with the government to help them protect lives and protect our country.

AM: Keir Starmer, the new Leader of the Opposition thanks very much indeed for talking to us.

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