AM: Welcome and happy new year.
JA: Happy new year.

AM: Now, I know because you say so again and again and again that you think the Tories are wrecking the NHS. If that’s the case, why is it that when you look at the official patient satisfaction numbers for people who have spent a night or several nights in NHS hospitals they’re actually going up? They’re higher than they were under Labour at the moment and going up.

JA: Well, what I look at is the waiting times, the waiting lists, which are now at 4.3 million. There’s two and a half million people waiting beyond four hours in A&E, 27,000 people waiting beyond two months for cancer treatment. These are all targets and access standards which were routinely met under the last Labour government. People are waiting longer under this Tory government, and it’s because the Tories, I’m afraid, have been running down the NHS for nine years, starving it of cash, cutting it back, privatising elements of it, failing to get the staff we need. And now Theresa May’s saying we’ve been running it down for nine years —

AM: We’ve got a ten-year plan now.
JA: Yeah, a ten-year plan to clear up the mess that she has made. It doesn’t need ten more years of the Tories, it needs a Labour government to save the NHS.

AM: One of the things we do know about you very clearly is that you would spend a bit more. You’re talking about a four to five per cent annual increase in NHS budgets rather than 3.4 per cent under the Tories. What would be your personal priority for that extra money?
JA: Look, just on that point, it’s not 3.4 per cent. You’ve really got to examine the small print on this, because when you take into account the wider cuts to public health budgets, when you take into account the wider cuts to training budgets, take into account the wider cuts to the –

AM: Look, we can all argue about the numbers. I’m accepting that you’re going to spend more; I’m just asking you what’s your top priority?

JA: But Andrew, it means there’s a billion pounds less. A billion pounds worth of cuts in health services this year. So it’s actually about an increase of 2.7 per cent under the Tories. And the public health cuts which are coming, they’re going to decimate community public health services. It means, for example, the equivalent cut means 1600 less health visitors, 1700 less school nurses, 630,000 less sexual health interventions. They are deep cuts to community health services coming down the line.

AM: But we have you here as the Labour spokesman. I want to ask you, one of the areas that people might say both sides have equally failed is when it comes to social care. You have a fantastic headline, A National Care Service, but underneath that headline it’s very unclear what that actually means. At the time of the election you laid out various ways of funding it, including a social care levy and so forth. Have you decided how to fund it yet?

JA: Well, what we think the immediate priority is, is to stabilise the social care sector.

AM: You say that’s not enough. In your own manifesto you say that’s not nearly enough.

JA: This is a sector that suffered seven billion pounds worth of cuts under the Tories over the last –

AM: Let’s look forward, let’s talk about the future.

JA: Yeah, but the social care sector is in dire straits right now, and actually we’ve just heard today the Secretary of State on the rival news channel saying that the social care Green Paper is going to
be delayed again. I mean, it’s supposed to have been out before Christmas. It’s going to be delayed again.

AM: So again, I asked you about your own plan, because you laid out various funding possibilities. Have you decided how to fund social care going forward?
JA: Well, we are proposing a national care service, as you quite rightly said. But when the government come forward with their proposals we will test their proposals –
AM: Surely it’s up to you to fund your own proposals
JA: Well, we know how we’re going to fund our proposals.
AN: How are you going to fund your own proposals?
JA: Well, we’re going to fund our proposals on social care in the same way we’re funding our proposals on the national health service, by making different decisions on taxation.

AM: So it’s coming from general taxation because you did talk about a funding levy.
JA: For what we call means tested adult social care, which is the social care which local authorities are asked to provide, which has been cut back by about seven billion, which means about 400,000 very elderly and vulnerable people are not getting the support that they used to get, which is why we’ve got these tremendous pressures on many parts of the NHS, we are saying that we would put an extra eight billion into that pot over a parliament.

AM: But what would it actually look like? I’m still slightly confused. Would we actually see, across the country, a network of government funding national care homes opening up for people who need care?
JA: Well, we want to see greater integration at a local level between social care provision and the local NHS.

AM: Would this be new homes or would this be the current privately run and privately funded -
JA: Well, there’s still going to be a role for privately provided residential social care homes.

AM: You’re not going to try and, as it were, squeeze them out by putting in state homes instead?

JA: Well, you know, I don’t think we can go back to the way it was in the 1970s. You know, you’ve got to make –

AM: In other areas, you do want to have state intervention.

JA: I know, but you know, the language of socialism is one of priorities, to get the phrase slightly wrong. But you know, you’ve got to priorities your social expenditure decisions.

AM: Would it be fair to say therefore that you’d keep something like the current network of private health care homes but you’d regulate them better and you’d ensure that people working in them are better paid?

JA: Well, the priority right now is to expand access by putting the money back into means tested adult social care to improve quality. But you just touched on a really interesting point when you talked about pay. Because a lot of what we need in social care and the wider NHS is a workforce, right? And one of the big problems with what is being announced today is that there isn’t a credible plan for workforce. We have 100,000 vacancies across the NHS, 110, vacancies across the social care sector, they’re short of 40,000 nurses, nurse numbers are going down, and it’s because training places have been cut. They’ve got rid of the bursary. And Sajid Javid, the Home Secretary, is talking about imposing a £30,000 salary cap on staff coming from the EU and elsewhere to work in the NHS. If Sajid Javid wanted to put the NHS first he would get rid of that salary cap, but instead he’s putting his own leadership ambitions first. That’s quite disgraceful.

AM: As we were discussing during the paper review, none of us know what’s going to happen next. There could be a general election very soon. You could be Health Secretary very soon. In those circumstances, you’ve got this Conservative plan, you’ve got
this 10 year plan being announced today, do you simply rip it up and start again?

JA: Well, I mean, a lot of the announcements in the plan, like trying to expand mental health services, getting better at how we deal with cardiovascular conditions, getting better at how we treat cancer, there’s nothing inherently wrong with those aspirations, the point is the funding isn’t sufficient and the staff isn’t there. We need a staffing plan for the NHS.

AM: Just on legislation as well, however, there’s been a proposal from the heads of public health for what’s been called a pudding tax. You know, you have a childhood obesity strategy. Obesity’s a real problem. There’s a strategy for sugary drinks but not for sugary food. Would you be in favour of a tax on sugary food to try to persuade people to eat less sugar?

JA: I think the so-called sugar tax on fizzy drinks has been a success. I think we should expand that to, for example, milkshakes. Matt Hancock is doing an interview in the Sunday Times today where he said the answer to the public health crisis like obesity and alcohol problems is more Facebook advertising. That’s not the route to go down. I think we have to get serious in this country about taking on the sugar industry – and the salt industry, by they way, because high blood pressure is causing a lot of other public health problems as well. We’ve got to get better at taking on big industry and having that argument.

AM: Has Jeremy Corbyn changed his mind about Labour being a party where basically the decisions are taken by the membership and not by the leadership?

JA: No.

AM: In that case, why, given that 72 per cent at least of Labour members want a second referendum and a similar number want to stay inside the EU is the party so enabling Brexit and is so against the idea of a second referendum?
JA: The party isn’t enabling Brexit. That’s not the position of the Labour Party. We’re not enabling Brexit.

AM: I was told in previous interviews that if there is an election the Labour Party’s position will be to deliver Brexit.

JA: We’re not enabling Brexit. This country had a referendum. The British people voted in that referendum for Brexit. I’m a remainer, the Labour Party’s an internationalist party. I’m very disappointed by the outcome of that referendum. But that’s the way the country voted. And yes, we are a democratic party because we had a party conference where our delegates went away, locked into a room for hours upon hours, and came up with a motion, a resolution which was endorse by that conference and which said that –

AM: And which your leader is patently and obviously worried about. This notion that, you know, we’re a parliamentary democracy and this is all about giving power to parliament. We now have a different proposal on the table about how we leave the EU, the prime minister’s plan, which people weren’t voting on at the time of the first referendum, and lots of MPs think it is right now to give people the chance to vote on what is actually likely to happen rather than sort of theoretical long-term Brexit. What’s wrong with that?

JA: Well, because the point that we went to the people with our manifesto in 2017 saying we respected the result of that referendum. We are committed to voting against Theresa May’s deal. I mean, goodness knows whether we’ll actually have a vote on it next week and the speculation in the newspapers again – it wouldn’t surprise me if that’s delayed. That tells you how beleaguered this Tory Cabinet is. But then if that is voted down, then it’s incumbent upon the government to come forward with alternative proposals and try to renegotiate.
AM: Jeremy Corbyn said earlier in this process that if it needed more time for negotiation, then Article 50 should be extended or postponed. Is that still party policy?
JA: That’s up to the government.
AM: Now I’m asking is it Labour Party policy?
JA: We’re not calling for the extension, but it’s up to the government to decide if they lose the vote – if they bring forward the vote and if they subsequently lose it. I mean, we know that there’s been so Tory whips are hopeful they might get it through. I’m very sceptical, but we have to wait and see.

AM Jon Ashworth, thank you very much indeed for talking to us.
(ends)