AM: Tristram Hunt, talking of the Labour Party, was one of several high profile figures in Labour who left the front bench when Jeremy Corbyn became leader. At the time he said, ‘it’s important to be honest about it – I have substantial political differences with Jeremy.’ We’ve not heard a great deal from him since, but he’s giving a big speech on tackling inequality tomorrow, and he joins me now. Good morning to you.

TH: Good morning, Andrew.

AM: Now, you talk in this speech about moral outrage, about inequality and poverty in this country. Are you suggesting that in the past Labour governments haven’t had enough of that?

TH: No. There’s always been moral outrage about inequality. That’s the defining purpose of the Labour Party. We came into being to challenge inequality, to promote social mobility. But the message of my speech tomorrow is that the nature of inequality is changing, and as the nature of inequality changes we need new tools and policies to deal with it.

AM: So what do you mean by the nature of inequality is changing?

TH: Because we can’t just focus on income inequality any more. We can’t just focus on material poverty. We also have to think about family, about community, about culture, about the opportunities which young people have to fulfil their potential, above and beyond just material poverty.

AM: So it’s about ladders but it’s also about the accumulation of capital. People have lots and lots of money tied up in their houses, and you’re proposing a new wealth tax.

TH: Well, what I want to see is to make sure that we have a tax system which reflects the great concentrations of wealth we’re
now seeing in assets, particularly in property. And so I would get rid of the council tax system and have a new – AM: Completely?
TH: Yeah, and have a new property tax based upon the value of the property. But I’m not interested in just taxing for tax sake. It’s a question of what you do with it, and what I want to do with it, Andrew, is then to tackle inequality at root, to focus on universal childcare, quality childcare, focus on technical and vocational education, focus on the mental health of mothers. To do all of those things which we know will tackle inequality and disadvantage. Because at the moment, by the age of seven, 80 per cent of the attainment for rate for GCSEs is already set in stone, and we’ve got to challenge that at root. That is what the Labour Party is about, and David said quite rightly just then the Labour Party needs to get together, show some unity, show what we’re about – and that’s tackling inequality.

AM: Now, I can see two lines on attack on this new policy. One is that it’s very centralising. You’re taking away from local authorities one of their last real powers, to levy council tax, and making a centralised tax. So that’s one problem.
JH: Yes. And I think – I’m a great supporters of devolution, I’m a great supporters of councils having – and combined authorities more autonomy over business rates, so we’ve got to work that out. We have to make sure that councils as they do in America, you know, most OECD countries have this sort of system of taxation and they also have a very devolved model of city and regional government so you can work out the two together.

AM: So you can do both together?
TJ: Yeah.
AM: Okay, the other thing that people will say is here we go again, it’s back to the mansion tax which didn’t do very well for the Labour Party at the last General Election, this is a kind of class envy tax and I suppose the point underlying that is it’s fine to
have moral outrage and be the anti austerity party, as Labour is now, but you have to win over lots of people who are not themselves poor but who then have to feel it is their duty to do something, pay something back.

JH: Yes, and that’s the other message of my speech. When we talk about inequality it can’t just be hammering the top one percent and thinking about the bottom, actually we need to think about how inequality affects the totality of our society. And why people I think didn’t like the mansion tax was it seemed very arbitrary and unfair. You know this two million hit and what is and is not a mansion. And what we have to make sure is that you have a progressive property tax, because at the moment council tax is pretty regressive for those in the poorest incomes and is very generous for those in properties worth, you know, five ten fifteen million pounds. But this isn’t just tax for taxes sake, it’s what you do with the money. And I think we also have to realise, Andrew, is that over the course of the 20th century - taxation began in the early part of the 1900s focusing on wealth and assets and we focus more and more on income and national insurance, I think we need to go back –

AN: back to where we started?

TH: to wealth and assets because that’s a more progressive approach and that’s where I - I disagree with the front bench ‘cause I’m not interested in putting the top rate of income tax back up to 50p. What I am interested in is more tax on wealth and assets to tackle inequality. That’s what you want to do with the money.

AM: Absolutely. Now I just wondered to what extent this is also a tactical move, because we keep being told in the papers that there are now two Labour Parties. There’s Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party with the leadership and a mass movement behind him who are way to the left, and then there’s the moderate right wing Labour Party who are by and large the MPs. This feels to
me a bit like a bridge or an olive branch from your side of the party towards the other side of the party.

TH: Well I think on whatever side of the party, and all parties are broad churches in one way or another, what we have to do in the Labour Party is have intellectual and political renewal. We’ve lost two General Elections. We haven’t made a radical exciting case for why people want to vote Labour and why it will make Britain a better place to live and grow up and have your children go to school.

AM: So in a sense, you’re saying, I’m Tristram Hunt, I am not a right winger. This is what I believe.

TH: This is radical politics. This is what the Labour Party’s about and I think, again as David said, the Labour’s Party’s been looking too internally recently, who’s up, who’s down, who’s in, who’s out. Actually what we’re about, what we were founded to do was tackle inequality and we need to get back to that. As the nature of inequality changes we need different and new responses.

AM: And you need to change the argument away from the Syrian vote. You voted with the government. What kind of response did you personally get to that vote?

TH: I’ve had a mixed response, both from constituents and from party members. There were some constituents who were supportive and others who were opposed. I would say in my local party in Stoke on Trent the majority were opposed to that decision, and so this Friday’s Constituency Labour Party meeting we’ll have a discussion about that. But I –

AM: Have you had a lot of abuse, personal abuse, your family threatened, anything like that?
TH: No, and I think there have been some pretty ugly comments on Facebook, but we can take those as politicians. I think Polly’s right, we need to be – have a big and active debate, but when you do get members of parliament having to call in police protection to their family, then I think we’ve crossed a line and I think some of the ugly comments surrounding the stop the war coalition for example I think they’ve been very irresponsible with their language and activities, picketing Labour Party headquarters when we were trying to fight for the Oldham by election. I find it extraordinary that –

AM: But is not just outside the Labour Party because your leader said there would be no hiding place for those like you who voted with the government and that’s presumably what this means.

TH: Well we should all be open and accountable about which way we vote and I think that’s about modern politics. One of the advantages of digital democracy is that people can get in touch with you before and after a vote to express their views –

AM: And it’s good they do.

TH: and one of the down sides is people lose some of their reservations, shall we say, when it comes to taking this kind of politics on the web.

AM: so what’s your message to the party generally about the tone of this debate?

TH: My message to the party is that we have to have a much more respectful tone about differences within the party. It seems to me that every time Jeremy says he wants a gentler, kinder of politics we seem to have a swathe of outrage from certain parts of the party and –

AM: His people aren’t listening to him. Can I ask you about one other story that’s been in the papers all day which is the possibility of a reshuffle on the back of a very, very good by
TRISTRAM HUNT

election result for Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party and it’s now suggesting he might use this opportunity to remove some of his main critics in the party, notably Hilary Benn from the positions that they’re holding at the moment. Would that be a dangerous thing for him to do in your view?

TH: Well first of all let’s pay tribute to Jim McMahon, our great new member of parliament for Oldham who fought a brilliant campaign and just the kind of –

AM: Let’s not spend too much time doing it Tristram.

TH: Just the kind of moderate mainstream MP we want in Westminster. I think you want what they call in the States, ‘bench strength’ when it comes to the Shadow Cabinet. You want the team of rivals, you want actually lots of people from different parts of the party. There seems a bit of a Sunday story and I’ll go back to my message is that rather than who’s up and who’s down

AM: Would you be worried to see such a reshuffle?

TH: Rather than who’s up and who’s down let’s focus on what’s important, challenging inequality and new policies and systems to do that. That is what the Labour Party is about and when you speak to David Earlie and others what frustrates people are the divisions and not focussing on what matters.

Ends