

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 7TH FEBRUARY, 2021

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AM: The Labour Party hasn't had its best week. It's Leader, Sir Keir Starmer, was forced to apologise after a dust up about his policy towards the European Medicines Agency, which is embarrassing, but to be honest, the kind of thing that's quickly forgotten in the real world. But with 112,000(?) people dead in Britain from Covid-19, and the country in the middle of another national lockdown you'd expect Labour to be way ahead in the polls. It isn't – it's behind. What's gone wrong? I'm joined by the former Leader of the Party, now its Shadow Business and Energy Secretary, Ed Miliband.

Ed Miliband, 111,000(?) people dead. One of the worst death rates in the world and I think the worst death rate of any major country anywhere in the world and yet the Labour Party, the main opposition party, is behind in the polls. Something is going wrong?

EM: I don't see it like that. The way I see it is that we should focus on what's actually happened in the country. You're right, we've had a terrible number of deaths and we're going to have to learn lessons from that. One of the lesson we've got to learn from it is the deep inequality in our society, because it's clear that in deprived areas the death rate is double what it is in less deprived areas. There's lessons to learn about our public services – and do you know what? Leaders have good weeks and bad weeks, but what's the most important thing Keir Starmer said since he became Leader, that after this crisis is over there can be no return to business as usual. That means we've got to create a fairer, a more just, a more equal country. And you know that's what –

AM: Boris Johnson says much the same.

EM: Well, and there amounts of differences. Let me tell you the differences and we can already see them emerging, and what

you're going to see, Andrew, as we emerge from this crisis, is that these battle lines start to be drawn. So let me give you some examples. On Universal – No, I'm going to show you the differences.

AM: Give me one example, then I'll ask you a question if that's all right?

EM: Okay. On Universal Credit we've said it will be quite wrong to drive hundreds of thousands of people into poverty in this crisis as the government is planning to do by cutting Universal Credit in April. Keir Starmer has led the fight to say that will be the wrong thing to do and the government refuses. The question of British policy, who can create that fairer, more equal society and I believe it's Labour.

AM: All right. We don't know what the government are going to do about Universal Credit yet, but let me ask you about something we do which is the government are going to quite soon publish its criteria for getting out of lockdown and that's what everybody in the country wants to know. So what are your criteria? What has to happen before you start to lift lockdown in your view?

EM: Well look, I think our criteria are going to be quite similar to the government's criteria. Infection rates, hospitalisation, death rates and obviously crucially the roll out of the vaccine and what is happening in relation to the new variant. I mean I'll say something which I think is quite sort of maybe a surprise maybe not in this, which is I don't think the government should sort of rush on this. I think they've got a plan which is to look at this and to make an announcement on February 22nd. The earlier date that schools can reopen is early March. Talking to teachers in my constituency this week they say look, we want this properly planned and what's the lesson we learnt from a year of this crisis, don't stop and start. Don't exit too quickly. Do this cautiously and judiciously, and by the way, Andrew, have a quarantine system that works and maybe we'll get onto that.

AM: One way of getting out of this, whether it's a quarantine system or not, is vaccine passports have been talked about a lot. What's the Labour Party's view of that?

EM: I think we should be open to this. They may be necessary. The way I see it is –

AM: Being open is not a position.

EM: Well, let me explain. The way I see this is that we've got to obviously get the vaccine rolled out, and it's brilliant the speed of roll out. We've got to have a quarantine system that works and at the moment the government is proposing a quarantine system that covers just 5% of arrivals that happen each day in the UK. That is not an effective quarantine system. Now that quarantine system then gives us breathing space to work out what is actually happening in relation to these new variants and do we need vaccine passports? They may be necessary.

AM: You say maybe, another former Leader of the Labour Party is a lot more clear about that. Tony Blair says: "an international Covid pass is inevitable." And he says: "the government should establish a single global vaccine passport ahead of everybody else." He can take a stance. Why shouldn't the Labour Party?

EM: Well I'm saying we should be open to this but I think there are complicated issues to do with this vaccine passport, as you discussed with Adam Fleming earlier. Is it just for international travel, is about as you go about your business in your society? But if I can make this point. That's got to be looked at, but meanwhile, while that's being looked at. We're five or six weeks on from the South African variant being discovered. We still don't have a quarantine system in place. We still don't have a plan for a comprehensive quarantine system so let's proceed a step at a time, of course let's look at the vaccine passport, but let's get the quarantine right and let's get the vaccine right too.

AM: I mentioned earlier on Labour hadn't had its best week and one of the reasons for that was a leaked report on Labour values

which talked about the importance of the Union flag, dressing smartly, supporting veterans. Do you by and large think that to win back working class support you need to be a more obviously patriotic party?

EM: Of course we need to be a patriotic party and I find it pretty surprising that people think it's sort of controversial that Keir Starmer would appear with a Union Jack. He wants to be the Prime Minister of the country. But what is our patriotism? Our patriotism actually at this moment for me my patriotism is the incredible pride I have in how the British people have responded to this crisis. But I see the contrast between that and the way our country is run. Our public services that have been diminished and underfunded. Key workers who are underpaid in our country. A welfare state that has massive holes in it. And the task in the years ahead is to match the spirit of the British people with the kind of country we need to be. That's what my patriotism is about. That's what it was about in 1945, after 1945 for the Labour government and I think that's what you're going to see from Keir Starmer in the months ahead.

AM: Well neither of us were here in 1945, but let's look at Clive Lewis, one of your colleagues who responded to that same report saying the importance of the Union flag by saying that is Keir Starmer is, and I quote: "Moving down the track to the nativist right and that patriotism has a side that touches on the darkest sides of humanity," and a lot of Labour MPs agree with that.

EM: Well I don't think they do and I think Clive's wrong about that. I don't agree with him. You know the flag matters but it's what –

AM: Are you proud of the Union flag?

EM: Of course, and I'm particularly proud of our country and the way it responded to this crisis, but I go back to this point, Andrew, you weren't here in 1945, I wasn't accusing you of that don't worry – but what I do believe is we can learn lessons from past crises. What happened after 1945? We went through the

trauma of the war and we said never again are we going to go back to the kind of inequalities and injustices we had in our country. I know Keir Starmer very well. That's what motivates Keir Starmer. That's what fires Keir Starmer. That's why he wanted to become Leader of the Labour Party. This is his mission for Britain and that's what you're going to be seeing. What he's done so far is provided the constructive opposition our country needed, but as we come out of lockdown, as the vaccine gets rolled out, the fight will be for the future of the country.

AM: We need to know more about you stand for, we need to know more at that point what you stand for. Let me ask you about values however, because we both know there are differences in values and attitudes to patriotism and the flag and so forth. There is a very different attitude amongst some of the younger more metropolitan supporters of the Labour Party. Do you think that people don't feel proud about the Union flag shouldn't be in the Labour Party?

EM: No, of course not. Look, people have different views about that. How you regard the flag is a matter of people's different opinions. What matters and what unites the Labour Party I actually what unites the country and you see this from all of the conversations you have with people, is people think we've been through this terrible trauma, the 110,000 deaths that you talked about. We owe it to the British people to build something better. And you know, you've seen from Labour the differences. So for example you've been talking to Sian Berry about Green issues. We've said have a green recovery where we invest 30 billion over the next 18 months to create 400,000 jobs. The government isn't doing that. The government isn't moving on that. You see the government in this crisis freezing public sector pay. So I think there are big differences and I think the differences are beginning to emerge but I think it's been right in this period, because I think that's what the country's wanted, for Keir to show the kind of constructive opposition that we have, but also to push the

government on the key issues of fairness and how we build a better country.

AM: But there is a gap, is there not, between the views on culture and patriotism and much else of a lot of Labour Party members. You know this is true and Labour MPs and traditional Labour voters, particularly in the North and the Midlands of England, who turned away from the Labour Party in the last election in large numbers. My question is, how do you bridge that gap?

EM: Well you see I think that there is a coalition to be built in this country for a different approach in the future. You know we've had in the last decade the financial crisis, the crisis of Brexit and now the injustices and inequalities revealed by Covid. And I think they should all tell us something about the deep iniquities of our country. And I think you know there's a big coalition to be built for that. We can't just carry on with business as usual. We're talking today about supporting businesses. There needs to be a new relationship between government and business. We're saying that we've got to suspend business rates for another six months to keep businesses going through this crisis. Maybe you wouldn't have expected that from Labour, but it's about government and business working together. A proper industrial strategy for the green jobs we need. Building up our public services again. Not making people live on 74 quid a week on Universal Credit. Not saying to kids, to poor kids, you can't get free school meals during half term. Those are the values that Keir Starmer's fighting for and that we're fighting for.

AM: Let me ask about another difficult issue at the moment, which is what happens about this coalmine in Cumbria. Should it open or not?

EM: No, it shouldn't.

AM: Which is bad news for all the people who want to work there in Cumberland.

EM: And we've got to find alternatives for those people. Look, we've just got to be clear about this, which is we can't be opening new coalmines and then claiming to be a big climate leader in our country. The government's got to go to other countries – it's hosting a very important summit in November, COP26 on international climate change trying to fight climate change, and we're going to be saying to other countries you can't open new coalmines and then the government comes along and says, but we're going to open a new coalmine ourselves. We've got to find alternatives.

AM: You picked up the Mail on Sunday this morning and you read the story about your friend Charlie Faulkner, a very embarrassing story for the Party, isn't it?

EM: Look, he shouldn't have said it. He was talking in the context of lawyers and the way the law was changing, but it was a very poor choice of words. I've spoken to Charlie this morning, he's very, very sorry and apologises for what he said and it shows we've got to be careful with our words. All politicians have to be careful with our words.

AM: Particularly it's offensive to people at this particular time.

EM: Of course, and he knows that. I know Charlie very well and Charlie thinks that the country has been through a terrible, terrible trauma and this in no way reflects his view about the Covid crisis.

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