ANDREW MARR SHOW, 9TH APRIL, 2017

EMILY THORNBERRY, Shadow Foreign Secretary

Andrew Marr: Now then within hours of the American missile strikes being announced, Labour’s Deputy Leader, Tom Watson applauded them as a direct and proportionate response, while Jeremy Corbyn condemned Washington. So what does the opposition really think about this hugely important foreign policy dilemma, the Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry is here. Welcome Emily Thornberry.

So on which side do you fall? Are you with Tom Watson or Jeremy Corbyn on this?

Emily Thornberry: We all agreed that we need to have the war stop as soon as possible. We look at these terrible pictures and we know that only a political solution will solve this. So the question is how do we fast do this?

Andrew Marr: Was the Trump strike wrong?

Emily Thornberry: So I think, and it is our party position, that the best thing for Donald Trump to have done was to be involved with the United Nations in ensuring that we had a speedy investigation into ensuring that we have clear evidence that Assad was responsible for that strike and then for us to work as part of the international community to do something about it. And to act unilaterally was wrong.

Andrew Marr: The problem with waiting for the UN, as we both know, is that when it comes to the Security Council Russia simply vetoes and vetoes and vetoes and therefore it can look like a recipe for complete inaction.
**Emily Thornberry:** Yes, but the point is this, isn’t it? Is that there is no way that the Russians could say that it would be wrong for there not to be an investigation. Remember the Russians have a completely different explanation as to why this chemical attack happened.

**Andrew Marr:** Do you believe them? It’s nonsense, isn’t it?

**Emily Thornberry:** Clearly it is more than likely that it was Assad’s responsibility, but where we ought to start from is we can be sure. Because there are UN investigators in Syria at the moment, they have already got one –

**Andrew Marr:** And as Guardian journalists there more or less at the time and we got very good reports back.

**Emily Thornberry:** No, no, absolutely, but then the question is where does the Sarin come from? So the UN investigators have already got rid of one thousand three hundred tons of it and we need to make sure that the rest of the chemical weapons throughout Syria is got rid of and we need to do that as an international community. Now who can be against that?

**Andrew Marr:** Can I ask about the kind of principled Labour position on this. If it was established by the UN in a parallel universe that this was definitely Assad’s fault, would the Labour Party support using strikes against him?

**Emily Thornberry:** Well not in a parallel universe. I mean I don’t agree with you. I do think that it is in this universe, it is within this world that it –

**Andrew Marr:** It’s now too late probably for the UN to do it, so that’s why I said parallel universe.
**Emily Thornberry:** Of course. Okay. Well I think that we have to be part of international agreement, so if the international community felt that the only way in which this could be dealt with would be by way of military action, but the question really –

**Andrew Marr:** Sorry, so there are circumstances in which Labour would support the use of military action against President Assad?

**Emily Thornberry:** The question is how do we bring this war to an end? That’s where we actually start from. So anything that we do has to be seen through the lens of, will this bring this war to an end faster? Will more bombs in that area bring the war to an end faster? Will it bring the parties around the table? Or will we just – as we’re seeing at the moment – a division of the international community? I mean have we not set back the negotiations as a result of what has happened in the last couple of days?

**Andrew Marr:** Taking all that into account, you have said yourself, I am not a pacifist.

**Emily Thornberry:** I’m not.

**Andrew Marr:** So I come again to the question, under what circumstances would Labour supporters strike against Assad?

**Emily Thornberry:** If there is a plan, there has to be a plan. You have many politicians sitting on your – sitting in these chairs the last few years, you know, have we learnt nothing from Iraq? Have we learnt nothing from Libya? We need to have a plan, it needs to be clear. You know of course there are many types of interventions and military intervention is the last, but it has to be part of a plan and it has to be part of how do we get a lasting peace. And in my view at the moment what we need is the international community to be around the table. The fact is that Syria is not only a civil war, it’s a regional war and we have
international players and they need to be working together to work out what it is that they’re going to do. Seven years of dreadful war.

Andrew Marr: And the Russians are completely pivotal to this. The Russians are pivotal to this –

Emily Thornberry: Of course they are.

Andrew Marr: They are, as it were, in control and I suppose the problem with your position is what possible pressure can there be on either them or Assad if military options are taken entirely off the table? They carry on. The situation of talking to the Russians, letting the Russians sort this out has gone on for years and years and years. Huge numbers of people have been killed and made homeless by that. So if it carries on what happens?

Emily Thornberry: Well, there are so many international players involved. You know there’s Saudi Arabia, there’s Turkey, there’s Hezbollah. You know it goes –

Andrew Marr: But they don’t count compared to the Russians.

Emily Thornberry: I hear you and I understand that but in the end there has to be a form of international agreement. I’m not saying it’s easy. I’m not saying it’s easy, but what I am saying is that continuing to bomb in Syria is not the solution.

Andrew Marr: Were you disappointed when you heard that Boris Johnson was not going to go to Moscow after all?

Emily Thornberry: Well, if Boris Johnson thinks that it is more appropriate for him to be involved in the G7 process then that’s a matter for him. But you know what really matters for me is that we do start talking and obviously that has to include talking to the
Russians. And not – and not this continual division. You know a lot of what we’ve heard is great rhetoric, but it is not peacemaking. You know it makes great headlines what’s been going on in the last couple of days.

**Andrew Marr:** So where would you start? If you were in the Foreign Office now on day one, where do you start?

**Emily Thornberry:** I would start with kick starting the Geneva Peace Process and making it serious. You know it’s been meandering on for years.

**Andrew Marr:** It fell apart before. How do you kick start it?

**Emily Thornberry:** I mean I think that we just simply have to be honest with each other and start being prepared to compromise, start being prepared to talk, you know. I mean jaw jaw, there is no other solution.

**Andrew Marr:** Jaw jaw’s killed a lot of Syrians.

**Emily Thornberry:** Jaw jaw has killed a lot of Syrians and so has the bombing. You know I mean what is your solution? There is no military solution to this. The only one is a political one and the question is has the last week brought a political solution any closer? I’m afraid it hasn’t. And I don’t think that the government’s position on this is one that helps.

**Andrew Marr:** Does it cause you a lot of problems that so many of your colleagues disagree with you? Tom Watson, I think Nia Griffiths, who’s the Defence Spokesman doesn’t agree either and there’s at least –

**Emily Thornberry:** Well that wasn’t what Nia said to me, so I don’t know where that came from.
Andrew Marr: She’s with you, is she?

Emily Thornberry: Look, I don’t want to get into internal gossip but I mean I appreciate that Tom has had a different position to us and he did last time there was a vote. I mean this is you know –

Andrew Marr: And 17 Labour MPs have called for a no fly zone, which would involve some kind of military involvement.

Emily Thornberry: A no fly zone has attached to it a large number of problems where obviously a no fly zone means that any jet that flies over that zone can get shot down. That will include Russian jets. Now you know are we happy to be doing that? Will it escalate the Syrian war? Will it move us towards peace?

Andrew Marr: So you’re against that, yeah.

Emily Thornberry: I mean you know. I mean people criticised us for being a weak position. It is not a weak position. It’s actually the strongest position. The easiest thing to do is to succumb to the pressure, but actually you have to have your eyes on the final goal which is peace and that’s difficult.

Andrew Marr: Particularly difficult when some of your colleagues are peeling off and going in the opposite direction, but let’s talk

Emily Thornberry: Well there’s always been debates within the Labour Party on issues like this and I’m not going to pretend that that there hasn’t ...

Andrew Marr: And this is a very important period for all political parties. We’re heading to the local elections. What in your view would success in the local elections look like for the Labour Party?
Emily Thornberry: You know I was here about a year ago and we were being told then, weren’t we, oh you know Labour’s so divided, it’s going to be terrible, we’re going to do really badly and actually we defied all expectations. And we defied expectations because you know we went into those elections united and more importantly because our activists on the ground got out on the doorstep and sold our message.

Andrew Marr: So when people say – I mean pollsters suggest you could lose more than a hundred councillors, a hundred and twenty-five councillors you think this is just ludicrous, media scaremongering and we should wait for the result?

Emily Thornberry: All I’m focused on is winning as many seats as possible and ensuring that we stay united as a party because our movement, when united can do great things.

Andrew Marr: Absolutely. When united, you say. But midterm you need to win seats really, don’t you?

Emily Thornberry: We need to be out there focused entirely on winning as many seats as we are able to.

Andrew Marr: You did produce this week one policy which got a good reaction in a lot of the media at least which was on schools.

Emily Thornberry: Free school dinners.

Andrew Marr: Free school dinners. Free school dinners for a lot of middle class kids

Emily Thornberry: Yeah, yeah.
Andrew Marr: By taking the money from VAT. Now every week Jeremy Corbyn – more or less every week Jeremy Corbyn comes to the House of Commons and he says, the underfunding of English schools in particular is an absolute scandal, they don’t have enough teachers, parents are being brought in to teach and we all know this is true. There’s a real problem in schools at the moment. Wouldn’t it be better to use the money from the VAT to actually employ more teachers rather than to give children from relatively affluent backgrounds free school meals?

Emily Thornberry: I’m a great believer in free school dinners for two reasons.

Andrew Marr: But you need teachers too.

Emily Thornberry: Hang on, let me just say. First of all because we’ve had it in my borough for a number of years and it’s a great thing and secondly I’m a product of free school dinners myself. You know I wouldn’t be the big strong girl I am today if it wasn’t for free school dinners.

Andrew Marr: I’m saying nothing. I’m saying nothing.

Emily Thornberry: But the point is this. Is that in my borough there were many people who were entitled to free school dinners who weren’t claiming them and because of the stigma. I mean I had to queue up separately with different colour tickets when I got free school dinners, you know, so everybody in the school does it and you sit down as a community and it’s part of your education when it comes to teaching people about healthy eating. And you sit down as a community. But just like – I mean you’re argument about why are we subsiding middle class kids to have lunch. Why are we subsidising middle class kids to go to state schools? It’s part of a state school educational experience as having lunch together.
Andrew Marr: Well it’s not just me. Let me read you Sir Michael Wilshaw. Former head of Ofsted. He says, ‘I don’t see why we should subsidise rich and prosperous parents who can well afford to pay for their children. I would rather see any extra cash that’s available being given to poorer parents.’

Emily Thornberry: Well I mean as I say you know I think that – I believe that education should be universal, that all children should go to state schools and part of that education should be having a lunch in which you are – and part of that is being taught about healthy eating. If you look at poor children now they’re not thin, they’re overweight and that is because of poor eating because of bad eating habits and part of your education ought to be teaching you about, you know, how you’d grow a carrot.

Andrew Marr: Very, very quickly indeed. Did Ken Livingstone speak anti-Semitically when he said those things about Hitler and the Jews do you think?

Emily Thornberry: I think it was a complete insult. I was surprised to say the least. Frankly I was bewildered that he wasn’t suspended from the Labour Party as a result. And then I was surprised he wasn’t thrown out. I think that he should have been.

Andrew Marr: Emily Thornberry, thanks very much indeed for talking to us.

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