

ANDREW MARR SHOW, SIR KEIR STARMER, LEADER OF THE LABOUR PARTY

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 10TH JANUARY, 2021

SIR KEIR STARMER, MP

LEADER OF THE LABOUR PARTY

(Please check against delivery (uncorrected copies))

AM: Last week I spoke to the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, in the first of our Leaders interviews this year. This morning I'm joined here in the studio by the Leader of the Labour Party, Sir Keir Starmer. Sir Keir, welcome.

Are these new rules tough enough?

KS: Well they are tough and they're necessary –

AM: Enough?

KS: They may not be tough enough but in a sense I think the most important thing is for people to get that message about stay at home. And it's up to the government to put that message out there the whole time. We've had mixed messages I'm afraid for the last 9 months which is why we've got a problem. I would like to see the Prime Minister out there every day with a press conference, making sure that that message is absolutely getting through, 'cause that's the most crucial thing.

AM: In terms of compliance we've seen those extraordinary scenes from Derbyshire where two women with cups of tea were collared by the police and got into serious trouble. Is that the kind of thing that you think is going to have to happen around the country?

KS: Well I don't think that was a particularly good example and there will always be examples of that. The police by and large have done a really good job in very difficult circumstances.

AM: Are the police going to have to fine people rather than warn them now, given the severity of what's going on in the country?

KS: I think there's a move today from the police to say look, we'll give one warning then we'll move to a fine. And I don't quarrel with that. That may be a good thing. But the most important thing

actually – ‘cause the vast majority of the British public have complied with the rules. They’ve done that for nine months. But they need clarity about exactly what is asked of them because we’ve had all this mixed messaging. Stay at home, don’t stay at home, eat out, don’t eat out, go back to work, don’t go back to work. All of that has led us to where we are. We need if we can to summons the spirit of last March when more people were actually staying at home.

AM: So clarity is our watchword. In that spirit should nursery schools close?

KS: Well I think there is a case for looking at nursery schools. We’re talking to the scientists about it, but I think quite a lot of people are surprised that primary schools are closed and that nurseries aren’t closed.

AM: That sounds like a probably yes.

KS: I think they probably should be closed. I do want to talk to the scientists about that, but I think one of the problems we’ve got is it’s very hard to see what tougher measures can be put in place, ‘cause the measures are pretty tough. That’s why actually complying with that stay at home message – I know I’m saying it over and over again but it really is so important that as Leader of the Opposition we carry that message to people to stay at home.

AM: Well there has been a bit of lack of clarity from both sides across the Commons on this and the union UNISON has called for nursery schools to be closed. Talking about primary schools however, I had the Prime Minister in that very seat last week and he said that schools were safe and 36 hours later he closed all the primary schools in England. When did you decide that all the schools had to be closed?

KS: Well on Sunday I said that a lockdown was needed and called for that. We saw the SAGE minutes, the medical advice just before the New Year and it seemed obvious to me that that’s where we

were heading. I thought the closure of schools was inevitable. I didn't want to close schools, I'll be honest about that because I think closing schools should be the last resort and it has a huge impact particularly on vulnerable children and children who don't have access to devices etcetera.

AM: In terms of clear messaging, if you thought it was inevitable should you not have said it earlier, because on the Sunday you said specifically that you didn't want to call for schools to close and the following morning your Education Spokesman said: "Schools should be the very last place to close." That was Kate Green on the Monday morning. So you did not give a different message from the Prime Minister during that period.

KS: Well I didn't want schools to close. I'm not going to shy away from that. I did say on Sunday I thought it was inevitable and we needed a plan for it, but I didn't want schools to close. I understand it's part of the national restrictions and that's the right thing, but the impact on children of further school closures is huge. They were out of school for the best part of six months last year –

AM: It's a really hard choice, I accept that, it's a very hard choice, but you had the SAGE advice from the 1st of January. You could see SAGE saying schools are going to have to close if we're going to get the R below one and like the government you didn't say anything for quite a while to come.

KS: Well, we got the SAGE advice I think as you say on the 1st of January. I think Sunday was the 3rd of January which is when I said there needs to be a national lockdown. I think that happened the next day. But I mean look Andrew, I'm not going to shy away from it. I didn't want schools to close because of the impact that has on vulnerable children and on those that struggle to learn at home. And that will be a lifelong impact if we're not careful. And I also felt –

AM: I'm sorry, the reason I'm asking this is that a lot of people have looked at the government's response to this and suggested the Prime Minister is slightly too slow to take really tough decisions.

KS: Yes.

AM: And just looking at this very tough decision, I acknowledge that, you would have been just as slow.

KS: Well, I didn't want schools to close, but Andrew let's look at the criticism there because what the Prime Minister was trying to do on your programme last week was to suggest that everything was going fine and it was the new variant that's knocked us off course. That hasn't been right, because he was very slow into the first lockdown last March –

AM: He didn't say everything was going to be fine. He said that he wanted to keep schools open, as you have said.

KS: He said the tiered system was working and he gave the impression, on your show and other times, that it's just the variant that's knocked him and the country off course. If you look at the last nine months he's been slow into every decision – the first lockdown was slow. He was slow on protective equipment, slow on testing – just let me finish this if you will – When it came to a circuit break in the autumn I called for a circuit break, he ridiculed that and said he wasn't going to do it. It was obviously what the medical advice was suggesting. Then he did it and we had a longer lockdown. Just before Christmas I said to the Prime Minister this five day mixing is going to cause real problems. And he said to me; "you're trying to cancel Christmas, why don't you just get honest?" And then a number of days later he did it. So the general criticism that the Prime Minister's been slow and incompetent is there.

AM: I'm just looking at this particular decisions. On this particular decision you were just as slow and just as indecisive as the Prime Minister and I wonder whether this is the moment to apologise to

the trade unions involved, for instance, who were saying much earlier that schools were going to have to close.

KS: Well look, I didn't want schools to close. I didn't think it was right for retail to be open in certain parts of the country and schools should be closing. It became inevitable and that's part of the national restriction. But look, to the trade unions, to teachers, to staff who worked hard over Christmas to try and get schools back up and running, I think we all owe them an apology and we all owe them, you know, recognition of what they have done because they've worked hard now for nine months in really difficult circumstances either in schools with key workers, then when they reopen and trying to do teaching online. This is a real struggle and we should all recognise that.

AM: So there is an apology. Let's talk about getting the schools back open again. What are your criteria for what would have to happen before schools can start to reopen?

KS: Well I think the vaccination really is the way out of this. We need to get those first four groups vaccinated and if that could be done by mid February then that is a huge step in the right direction. It's a job and a half.

AM: That's the end of February we're talking about?

KS: No, no, no, the middle of February for that. And that's what the Prime Minister has said. We'll hold him to that, but we will also help him with that because I think the vaccine is the only way out now and we need to see – we need two million doses a week in the next week or two. We need to ramp that up in February, so there's a huge piece of work to be done here and we all need to play our part in this.

AM: I'm sorry, let me jump in. So if community transmission is still really high, if hospital admissions are still really high, if the R is above one but the vaccination programme has gone according to plan you still reopen schools?

KS: No, we'll have to look at all the criteria, but the most important thing is that vaccination programme. Very difficult to see how we can start lifting restrictions in any meaningful way until the vaccination programme – at least that first part of it is rolled out successful. And the key questions are, does the NHS have the capacity for two million jabs a week? I think it does, I hope it does and we all should do whatever we can to ramp that up, and secondly will the manufacturers be able to deliver?

AM: Do you think teachers need to be vaccinated before schools reopen?

KS: Look, of course there's a strong case for teachers, for police officers, for prison officers, I get all that.

AM: Before schools open?

KS: Just bear me out. I think at the moment the first four categories which are targeted on those that are most likely to go into hospital and tragically to die are right, I think there is then a case for saying well let's look at other categories and teachers may well be one of those categories. But what I do feel strongly is that we've got to keep to the original four categories are the right categories.

AM: Sure, but is the reopening of schools contingent on teachers being vaccinated or not?

KS: No, I don't know that it necessarily is although if that can happen, that will be a good thing. But I just want to deal – this argument that there are sectors where there's a very strong case for vaccination for obvious reasons and I understand that and we're going to have to accommodate that, frankly, but at the moment we do need to focus on those that are most likely to go into hospital and tragically to die.

AM: Everybody is wanting this vaccine roll out to work as fast and effectively as possible. If you were Prime Minister, what is the one

thing that you would do now to ensure a better roll out of the vaccine?

KS: Make sure there are vaccine centres across the country. The government is doing that. Make sure we're talking to the manufacturers so that the doses come on stream –

AM: Tell me something the government isn't doing.

KS: We launched last week a Let's Vaccinate Britain campaign which is to get Labour Party members, trade unionists and people in communities to come and volunteer to help. I went to Newham, to the vaccination centre last week and what I saw there was a fantastic operation with lots of older people coming in to be vaccinated but they needed an army of volunteers to pass the information into communities, to help people get to the vaccination centre, to do some of the administration, to steward them into the building and to help them afterwards. So what I would do is what I did last week which is launch the campaign to say well you can volunteer to help with this, please come forward and do that. And people are doing that.

AM: I mean the government are asking for volunteers in terms of retired doctors and retired nurses to come and help the vaccination programme, but you'd go further than that?

KS: I'd go further than that because one of the most important things is to reach people in their communities to give them the confidence to come forward and volunteers can do that. And then there's the practical question of how do you actually get some –

AM: What kind of skills do you have to have to volunteer for this?

KS: All sorts of different skills, but practical skills to get people to the vaccination centre. What I saw was people arriving in cars, in taxis, in different ways getting to the vaccination centre. They need the information, they need the confidence to that and the practical backup and the Red Cross were there doing it as well. And all of that – I actually don't think this is an area where there's anything between the government and everybody else. Everybody in Britain wants to pull together to be part of this national effort,

and so do I. So what I've said to the Prime Minister is, notwithstanding the other challenges I've put to you I will work with you on this. We will all pull together on this.

AM: So apart from the need for more volunteers for the system you would say the vaccination programme they're doing all the right things, the things that you would do in terms of organising the centres, organising supply of vaccine, all of that, you're happy with?

KS: Well I'd want to make sure the resource is there for the NHS to hit that 2 million a week and be assured about that. I am very concerned – it's a point I think you put to the Health Secretary, that with the stress and strain on the NHS at the moment that is a real struggle which goes back to making sure people stay at home. But Andrew, on this issue, on this issue I actually do want to work with the government. I want the government to succeed. We'll hold them to account but we'll help them on this. It's very important.

AM: Sir John Bell very prominent figure you know said this about the NHS. He said; "the NHS has the theoretical capacity to immunise everybody in five days if they want, but I don't get the sense they're really motivated."

KS: Well I didn't hear John say that. At the moment, as I understand it, there aren't the doses of the vaccine available to the NHS even if they could roll that out in five days, so I don't know, I didn't hear John say that. I respect him hugely, but as I understand the problem at the moment is does the NHS have the capacity to do the doses week on week? I hope it does, I think it does and I know everybody's working at great speed on this. My wife works in the NHS in a hospital. I know from her experience just how hard people are working. But then there is also whether the manufacturers are supplying the doses in time for that vaccination. But look, I want this to succeed. I want this national effort to succeed.

AM: We all do, we all do. You voted for the Brexit deal. Is there any aspect of the Brexit deal that if you were Prime Minister you would reopen, revisit and try to renegotiate? Anything that you would do to change it now?

KS: We voted for the deal because the choices before us were to vote for the deal, a thin deal. A deal that isn't a good deal for our manufacturers, for the service sector certainly, but the alternative was no deal. So we voted for that.

AM: So if isn't a good deal which bits would you reopen?

KS: Well there are bits already that need to be improved on. If you look at the creative industries and how they're going to operate across borders, there's huge gaps for them. The service sector of course has been largely left out. But I don't think that there's scope for major renegotiation. We've just had four years of negotiation, we've arrived at a Treaty and now we've got to make that Treaty work. It is thin, it isn't what the government promised, but it is better than no deal and we need to make it work. And you can see one of our criticisms of the government was that they didn't prepare and you're already seeing the problems at the borders.

AM: So would you reintroduce free movement of people?

KS: No look, I don't think there's an argument for reopening those aspects of the Treaty.

AM: No?

KS: Andrew, just hear me out. We have a Treaty, it's a thin Treaty. It's not what was promised. But I'm very conscious of the fact that everything I'm doing, everything the Labour Party are doing is geared and focused on winning a General Election in 2024. If we win that election and a Labour government comes in we will inherit that Treaty and the British people will expect us to make it work and the EU 27 will expect us to make it work. And I enter it in that spirit.

AM: You say you won't look again at the matter of free movement of people. Huge numbers of people in the Labour Leadership election and in the country voted for you on the basis that you would do that because you told them you would do that. The Daily Mirror asked you in specific terms: "If you become Labour Prime Minister will you bring back freedom of movement of EU citizens to the UK?" And your answer was, yes of course.

KS: Andrew, what I'm saying is this. We've had what, four years of negotiations with the EU. The last thing anybody wants including the EU is to start again from scratch with this Treaty. We have got to, for better or for worse, thin Treaty though it is, we will inherit that Treaty when we come into government in 2024.

AM: So you won't reintroduce free movement? You said that back in January last year, so not that long ago and also it was the sixth of your ten pledges that you were going to bring back free movement and now you're saying no I won't.

KS: Well Andrew, what I'm saying is we've negotiated a Treaty, or the Prime Minister's negotiated a Treaty, that now is the basis of our relationship with the EU. We didn't know what that was until we saw it just before Christmas. We now know what it is. It's thin, it's not what was promised, but whether we like it or not that is going to be the Treaty that an incoming Labour government inherits and has to make work. And it is not being straight with the British public to say we can come into office in 2024 and operate some other treaty. We have to make sure that treaty works.

AM: But it's quite a moment to drop a pledge as big as that and say that a future Labour government will not reopen free movement of people. A lot of Labour Party supporters who may have rejoined the European Movement and who desperately hope that - fight the struggle to rejoin the EU start here and starts with you would be very, very disappointed to hear this.

KS: I don't think there's a case for rejoining the EU, I've said that before. I think I've said it on your programme. But I think pretending to the British public that somehow after four years of negotiation the Treaty that's just been secured is going to be up for grabs and that the EU are going to start saying let's start all over again. That is not realistic, that is not going to happen.

AM: So you support the government's points based immigration system now?

KS: Well look, I don't support, we didn't support the government on that, we didn't vote for their immigration legislation. Not least because of the impact it has on key workers and those that have led us through the pandemic. But the point I'm making, Andrew, is that we were faced in the end with a choice between that deal, bad though it is and no deal and I've always in the public interest, in the national interest –

AM: You're now hooked on that, you're now hooked on voting for a bad and thin deal and in areas where most of your supporters would like you to look again, free movement of people being a very, very obvious example, you are stuck with doing nothing going ahead. Why did you place it in the first place?

KS: Well look, Andrew, we were stuck with a choice between the deal on the table and no deal and we made the right choice about that. I'm being honest about 2024, which is to say that whether we like that deal or not, and I think it's a thin deal, I don't think it delivers on the Prime Minister's promises, it is the deal that is going to be there in 2024 and the British public are going to look to the Labour Party and to the Prime Minister of a Labour government and say you need to make that work. There's no good complaining about it. And the EU 27 will also say we have all signed this off and you need to work with us to make it work. That is the realistic basis upon which we're going into that 2024 election.

AM: So it's a thin deal but you're going to stick with it. You did pledge free movement of people but you're not going to do that and you support the government by and large over the pandemic. Some people say what does Keir Starmer really stand for? Let me ask you some clear specific economic questions which might help us answer that.

Do you think everybody should have free broadband?

KS: Well, that was in the Labour Party Manifesto when the case was being made for it.

AM: It was yes, very popular.

KS: I actually think we should target those that most need it in the immediate weeks because between now and Easter many children and young people are not going to be able to learn at home, either because they haven't got devices, laptops and whatever it is, or because the broadband – they don't have broadband or they have expensive broadband because they're paying for data. That is an immediate problem that needs to be dealt with. So focus on those children or those families that most need it now would be my advice.

AM: And in the long run does that free broadband thing hold or not?

KS: In the long run we'll have to see what the situation is in 2024.

AM: Let me ask you something else. Debt at the moment is about 100% of GDP. What would be a dangerous level from your point of view?

KS: Well, we're going to have to reassess debt. We're at huge debt, huge borrowing. I'm not at this stage Andrew going to set out what the position is going to be in 2024. I don't know the state of the economy then. I do know that we need to have priorities going forward, secure our economy, protect the NHS and rebuild our country. When it gets to 2024 I will spell out in great detail what an incoming Labour government will do.

AM: Do you still want to scrap Universal Credit?

KS: Yes. Universal Credit needs to be scrapped and a new scheme put in place. In the immediate future what I'm very determined to do is to persuade the government to stop the cut to Universal Credit that's due to come in in April. That is going to affect millions of families that cut to Universal Credit. It's unfair and the government shouldn't be doing it.

AM: Let's turn to Scotland. You have said and I quote: "There should be a Constitutional commission" quotes: "to renew the case for devolution." Is that a very urbane way of saying no referendum?

KS: I don't think there should be another referendum. I don't think further divisive referendum is the right way forward.

AM: For how long?

KS: But I accept that the status quo isn't working and I don't accept the argument that if the status quo isn't working the next thing you do is to go to a referendum. I think that there are other things that you can do, other arguments that can be made in support of the United Kingdom.

AM: You said once, "the people of Scotland should decide this." If the people of Scotland decide this by voting for an SNP manifesto which says another independence referendum, what more can they do? What else should happen?

KS: Look Andrew, we're in the middle of a pandemic, probably the darkest moment of the pandemic, in Scotland as much as the rest of the United Kingdom. The idea that the only discussion we're having about Scotland is whether there should be a referendum when the health service is on its knees, the economy is really under strain. Lots of people and families are struggling in Scotland for their jobs in the future and every –

AM: Boris Johnson - another 40 years before there's another referendum. Is that about right?

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KS: - every time we talk about Scotland the only question is should there be another referendum.

AM: Another 40 years before one?

KS: Look, I heard the Prime Minister say that and I don't agree with him on that. But I do think –

AM: So sooner than that?

KS: - if you ask the people of Scotland what their priorities are, and this has been asked many times in the last three months, most of them understandably say the economy. Jobs, health, public service, public services. Not - and the idea that you know, we're talking about whether the May election should go ahead and we're talking about a referendum.

AM: We're out of time. A one word answer, final question, have you spoken to Joe Biden yet?

KS: No.

ENDS