ANDREW MARR SHOW
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NR: Is this a day to be honest with people, say look, it is bad, it’s not what we hoped for three months ago, but we’re going to sort it?

DA: We’ve gone through a very difficult year, as you know, and it was always going to take time to pull round from that. The recent by-election result was disappointing. But I think we are coming together now. We’ve got a new Chief Whip, Nick Brown, who’s one of the most experienced party managers in the House of Commons. And I think that as we come together, as you hear less noises off, I believe we can close the polling gap.

NR: Are you saying that the reason for this dismal by-election result, ten per cent of the vote, fourth you came – remember under Tony Blair it was 34 per cent of the vote – are you saying that this the continuing legacy of disunity?

DA: You know as well as I do that there’s a limit to what you can extrapolate from by-election results. And both these by-elections were ones that we couldn’t ever have expected to win, but the most recent one...

NR: But you did worse than Ed Miliband did in that seat, much worse than Tony Blair...

DA: ...But the most recent one was disappointing. And I would say to you that reports that the Labour Party’s demoralised are much exaggerated. We are the largest social democratic party in Europe. And actually that huge surge in membership is due to the current leadership. We have the right policies on whether it’s the NHS, whether it’s investing in the economy, and as you know, the Tories are fatally split on Europe. It consumed John Major’s
leadership, it consumed David Cameron and I believe it will consume Theresa May.

NR: Well, let’s talk about just that issue, because many people knocking on the doorsteps in Richmond, where you got fewer votes than you had members, in Sleaford where you got less than a third of the number of votes that Tony Blair got. One of the reasons, many of them said, was a confusion on the doorstep in answer to a simple question – maybe you could answer it – are you guys in favour of Brexit or in favour of stopping it?

DA: We’re in favour of first of all respecting the votes of 17 million people that voted Brexit. It would be very damaging for democracy if we dismissed those voters in the way the Lib Dems are. It can work for the Lib Dems in seats like Richmond, it won’t work nationally. We’re also in favour, under Jeremy’s leadership and under the leadership of our brilliant Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer, of getting the best possible negotiated deal. We’re in favour of what’s good for the British people.

NR: Well, many people might think that’s a perfectly sensible position, but sure ain’t simple is it? If you knock on the doorstep and someone wants to know very simply, ‘I want to know which of these two tribes you’re in, I want to know which camp you’re in,’ one of your MPs yesterday, Steve Reid, said you risked being the party of nought per cent. Because surely if you’re one of the leavers, one of the 52 per cent, you might as well go off and vote for somebody who really wants to leave. And if you’re one of the 48 per cent you might as well go off and vote for one of the parties – Lib Dems, for example – who are desperate to stay.

DA: I’m a huge admirer of Steve, but he’s wrong on this. What we have to do as a national party is not just speak for the 48 per cent, not just speak for 52 per cent, but bring the country together and hold the Tories to account. And one of the things
that’s happening, you know, and will become clearer as we move into the new year, the Tories are completely mishandling Brexit. All Theresa can say is Brexit means Brexit.

NR: So what we want to be clear about is now Labour will handle this in the future, particularly if you can get more parliamentary votes, if the Supreme Court rules against the government. Now, are you saying to people, ‘we’ll hold this up, we’ll block it if we don’t get our way on workers’ rights and other things?’ Or are you saying, ‘well, because we respect the will of the people, we gonna vote this come what may.’

DA: We’re not going to block it a trivial way. But there are really important issues for the British economy. If we lose access to the single market, let alone the customs union, that would be a huge blow to the British economy.

NR: So in certain circumstances you might block it?

DA: We will – no, block it. Block sounds like we’re being wilful. We will make the case for what’s right for the British economy. What on earth would you expect us to do?

NR: Well, you know, in the end, as I do, that all oppositions can do in parliament, because usually they lose votes, that’s the nature of opposition, usually to come without a majority – all you can do in the end, whatever your view is on anything, is try to slow business down or to defeat the government. And I’m asking you a bottom line: are you in the end willing to frustrate Brexit if Labour doesn’t get the things that it thinks is really important?

DA: We’re not about frustrating Brexit, but just last week Keir Starmer got Theresa to do something she’d sworn she would not do and come forward with her negotiating programme, some sort of White Paper. So we believe that step by step we can shed light
on what the Tories are doing and hold it up for the public to take a view.

NR: Well, I confess I’m no clearer whether you are going to frustrate Brexit in certain circumstances or never. But –

DA: You make it sound as if we’re playing a game.

NR: What are you prepared to do?

DA: You make it sound like we’re playing a game. We’re not playing a game; we’re trying to get the best outcome for the British people.

NR: Now, one of the things you say is important is access to the single market. That means freedom of movement, doesn’t it? So are you saying to your supporters: ‘I’m sorry, it’s economically in your interest for us to keep freedom of movement’?

DA: Access to the single market and freedom of movement are inextricably linked, and it would be wrong – and the Labour Party has said this over and over again – it would be wrong to put the economy anything other than first.

NR: So in other words, yes, you have to stick with freedom of movement?

DA: There’s going to be negotiation, but it’s misleading to suggest to people, as certain people do, that you access the single market and just dump freedom of movement. The Swiss, when they negotiated about access, they had to keep a measure of free movement, as did the Norwegians.

NR: This is why people talk about confusion. The man who is running for Mayor for the Labour Party in Greater Manchester,
Andy Burnham, says that freedom of movement of people has been defeated at the ballot box: it is no longer an option. You’re saying it clearly is an option.

DA: We believe in regional autonomy and Andy –

NR: Believe Labour saying different things in different cities?

DA: No. No, no, no. We believe in regional autonomy, and Andy always had those views. But the truth is you cannot have access to the single market without a measure of freedom of movement.

NR: Let’s quote somebody else. Caernwyn Jones, who’s the leader of the Labour Party in Wales. He accuses you of having, quote, ‘a very London-centric position. This is not the way people see it outside London.’

DA: Wales and the West Country and the northeast are some of the parts of the country that have the most to lose –

NR: He’s the first minister, he’s the leader of the party in Wales.

DA: I know, but what I’m saying to you is that some of the areas that were most pro-Brexit are actually the areas that we need to fight for in terms of investment and in terms of protecting British interests.

NR: So you, as an Inner London MP, you know more than the leader of the Labour Party in Wales or the man who’s running for Mayor in Greater Manchester?

DA: Well, if you’re talking about immigration, if that’s what they’re talking about, my experience is that Labour Party members all over the country want immigration rules that are fair and they
want reasonable management of migration. And I’ve been all over the country and that’s what I’ve found.

NR: Do you still believe that the people that complain about freedom of movement want, and I quote, ‘to see less foreign-looking people’ here?

DA: There is that element. There’s no question. However –

DA: Does Andy Burnham think that?

DA: There are perfectly –

NR: Does the Labour Party of Wales think that?

DA: There are perfectly legitimate political reasons for voting for Brexit. You know –

NR: No, I’m asking about freedom of movement particularly.

DA: Well, no, but if Tony Benn was alive he would have voted for Brexit. So I don’t tar all the people that voted for Brexit with the same brush. But you have to understand that –

NR: People that complained about freedom of movement wanting less foreign-looking people?

DA: No, it’s all very well to come and score points, but people are very frightened about this debate on Brexit. One of the things we want to do... you asked me what we want to do, we want to secure the position of EU residents living here. People are frightened on an individual level.

NR: Just finally, you’ve just promised at the beginning of this interview to close that polling gap, you said.
DA: Yes.

NR: When? And if it doesn’t happen, most of the critics of Jeremy Corbyn you can dismiss as his enemies, life-long enemies, but you’re a great friend, is there a moment at which even Diane Abbott looks and says, ‘you know what, maybe this simply isn’t working?’

DA: I’m confident we’re going to close the gap in the coming 12 months. We’ve had a pretty difficult 12 months, partly Jeremy’s enemies in the party, partly commentators, but we have the right policies and we have the right leader.

NR: But when?

DA: Within the coming 12 months.

NR: Within 12 months you’re going to get better? Thank you for now, Diane Abbott.

(ends)