AM: Tom Watson was last on this chair in September 2015, just after Jeremy Corbyn and he had stormed to victory in Labour’s leadership and deputy leadership contest. His declared mission then was to get Labour fighting fit to win power again in 2020. So how’s it going?

TW: Look, we’ve had a tough 18 months. We had a damaging second leadership election. So we’ve got an uphill struggle ahead. The polls aren’t great for us. But I’m determined now that we’ve got the leadership settled for this parliament that we can focus on developing a very positive clear message to the British people in a general election.

AM: All around the place there is a kind of withdrawing roar of people no longer having confidence that you can win. Are you yourself convinced the Labour Party can actually win a general election in this country?

TW: Oh yes, we can certainly win a general election. There’s a lot of work to do. We need to make sure that we address the concerns of the British people in a manifesto and that we communicate our message far more clearly than we have been doing. But yes, there’s nothing to say that Labour can’t win a general election.

AM: What I don’t want to do is to get into a kind of sterile debate where I say look at this poll and you say it’s fine, look at that and it’s fine. So I think we must look at one set of polling figures, possibly two. So this is the latest voting intentions from ICM. But all the pollsters are showing the same kind of gap, a big 13 or 14 point gap. Very, very bad for an opposition party at this point. Diane Abbott and others have said that this gap will be closed in a year, over the course of the next year, with the implication that if
it isn’t closed something dramatic needs to happen. Do you agree with that?
TW: Well, I mean, I’m not sure it’s set in - those sort of tests about where you’ve got to be in the polls are particularly helpful, but not particularly unhelpful for our leader Jeremy Corbyn. But yes, if you want to win a general election you’ve got to be leading the polls. To lead the polls you’ve got to have policies that people believe in and believe you can deliver on, and that’s a very big challenge for us.

AM: You’ve said that there’s an ‘existential crisis’ facing the party, and I guess this goes back to Labour’s history, this party that you love was created by an alliance between the organised, trade unionised working classes on the one hand and kind of intellectuals and thinkers and liberals on the other, and they came together in a slightly strange alliance. What it seems to a lot of people is that Brexit is breaking that apart.
TW: Well, I said we had an existential crisis during the leadership struggle last year when there was an impasse between our MPs and Jeremy, but you know, I do still think that people need a Labour Party. If you look at the values that underpin the Labour Party, the idea of the empowering state, that we want to reduce inequality, we want to give greater opportunity to everyone, not just the few, those values are still enduring. You know, we’ve been here before, where the working class and middle class people of Britain have been in an alliance with each other. You know, in the 1945 election –

AM: The question is are they still in alliance with each other?
TW: Well, I think it’s very possible to have a manifesto that addresses the aspirations of both sets of voters. And this challenge came in, you know, after 1945, when Attlee was leader. There was concern in the trade unions that we’d got too many middle class MPs. I hope that we can make sure that, at the general election, represent the interests of both.
AM: This is also about values isn’t it, and how people feel in their guts about life? John Cruddas, who did some work for you in the party about this said that since 2005, he said, ‘voters who are socially conservative are the most likely to have deserted Labour. They value home, family and their country, and Corbyn’s cosmopolitan views on migration, the monarchy and the armed forces are like to have exacerbated this disconnect.’ Without going into the personalities, there is a point there isn’t there?

TW: Well, jobs and homes is the bread and butter of politics, and there are too many people now who can’t –

AM: And patriotism and country -

TW: Yeah, there is no doubt about that. And we need to convince people that we want this country to be great again, that if you live and work hard in this country that you can eventually own your own home or rent a home at an affordable price, have a job that is satisfying and then have a dignified retirement.

AM: Make Britain great again.

TW: Well, look, you know, if – but political parties that don’t address those issues are political parties that don’t have a future. I think that’s what you’re trying to say. That’s what you’re trying to tease out.

AM: Well, what I’m asking is whether your traditional Midlands, Northern, West Country working-class voters still feel culturally attached to the party, as they should do?

TW: Well, I hope they do, because I hope they still know that Labour is the party of aspiration. And if you come from sort of humble origins that you will be able to get on in life with Labour in government. And people still remember the great Labour governments. You know, the idea that they still don’t need a party that challenges inequality, that offers opportunity and hope, I think is not correct.
AM: These are often quite socially conservative people in their views. They would stand for the national anthem and so forth. They are traditionalist and patriotic in many ways and they sometimes feel the Labour Party no longer represents them.

TW: I would reject any notion where people would say that the Labour Party is not a patriotic party. We’re very proud of our country and we’re very proud of singing the national anthem, you know, so I’m not sure if that’s the issue. The issue is what are the challenges facing this country? You know, we are seeing now people living in greater insecurity, the downside of globalisation if you like. Well, there’s a next wave coming, an industrial revolution based around automation, that will create greater insecurity. I think if Labour can craft an economic policy and a social policy that addresses those issues, then we can have a very exciting offer at the next general election and we can win that election.

AM: In terms of the policies that people are interested in around the Brexit vote, you were in a Leave constituency, a lot of your voters voted Leave. Would you agree that immigration was absolutely crucial to that vote?

TW: Oh, I think immigration was certainly one of the big issues in that referendum – if not the issue, yes.

AM: That being the case, what does it do to those Labour voters when they hear people in the leadership saying there should be no upper limit on immigration or that free movement might have to stay?

TW: Well, I think what we have to say is we understand what people were telling us in the referendum, and when those Brexit negotiations take place we do need to make sure that whatever replaces the free movement of Labour arrangements allows us to say ‘we control our borders, we want to be able to count people in and count people out.’ But also say it’s completely unacceptable to leave European workers in uncertainty. We were very
disappointed this week when the government didn’t give certainty that current European workers could stay here. Also, extremely disappointed that those refugees, those child refugees, that pledge, which was a solemn pledge by David Cameron, has been breached. So I think you’ve got to strike a balance. But I know my colleague, Diane Abbott, who leads on this, is in no doubt that unless we have a compelling policy on immigration at the next general election then we’re not going to win.

AM: So in a sense, one of your colleagues was saying to me, ‘Theresa May gets us off this hook because after Brexit we’re not going to have free movement of people and then we have a chance to start again and have a socialist immigration policy of our own that we can work through ourselves as the Labour Party.’ And in that context, I want to ask you do you think overall immigration in this country is too high, or too low, or just about right?
TW: Well, I don’t think you can say that. I think you could actually say London requires more liberal immigration policies, but there are other parts of the country where immigration may be putting pressure on public services like schools and hospitals. And that’s why, I think, that when we come out the European Union we can have an immigration policy that maybe addresses both those issues.

AM: Perhaps a regional policy, different immigration policies for different parts of the country?
TW: Perhaps indeed. These are nascent ideas, we’re not ready to sort of make them robust in a manifesto yet, but there is certainly a debate that is going on in the Labour Party right now and in sort of wider circles.

AM: Your leader said, after those Brexit votes, ‘the real fight starts now.’ What did he mean?
TW: I think what he meant – I agree with him on this – we’ve had a nine-month phoney war where the government have been trying to get their act together on their own negotiating plan. What the vote last week represented, Andrew, was just the firing of the starting gun on negotiations.

AM: Really?
TW: Yes, I do. I genuinely think that.
AM: Really, because Emily Thornberry was here last week and she laid down these very tough sounding, bold, important Labour red lines. Every single one of them was obliterated in those votes, when you and others voted with the government. And it seems that the battle is now over and the battlefield has been quit.

TW: Well I hope that we can convince people that’s not the case. You know, we demanded a bill in parliament so that we could raise some of these issues. The idea that we don’t want to come out of the European Union without the environmental protections we enjoy, without those workers’ rights, without those human rights and that when Theresa May is negotiating Europe we will be on her case day in day out.

AM: Except that she seems to be riding high in the Commons. She had these big, big majorities for the Brexit - the Article 50 Bill - she seems virtually unchallenged in her Commons authority. Hugely popular in the country and when you say the fight starts here a lot of people say well where is this fight going to happen? How is this fight going to happen? Where are going to be the crunch moments?

TW: Well, you know, it’s arithmetically true that we don’t have a majority in the House of Commons, otherwise we’d be the government. But it isn’t the case that we’re not going to keep applying pressure on the government to get the kind of Brexit that
we think benefits British workers and businesses. We don’t want a bargain basement on Europe.

AM: so my only question is where and how?

TW: At the despatch box, in discussions, in TV studios like this and of course in two years time Theresa May will have to come back with the deal she has negotiated.

AM: You see there’s an awful of people on the other side of the divide, as it were, who are passionate remainers, who are deeply disappointed. They see the Labour Party has become in effect a cheerleader for Brexit, you have no plan or way of actually altering Theresa May’s planning and we saw that this week.

TW: I reject the conclusion made there although I do understand why people who believe in the EU are disappointed. But look, we’re a democratic party. I don’t think we had any choice but to respect the decision of the people in that referendum. You know in that sense you’re talking about philosophy, you know, direct democratic decisions have trumped the decisions of representative democracies there. It shows that a referendum is a brutal tool. It doesn’t allow you to deal with nuance and complexity afterwards. But we have had to respect the decision of the people to fire that starting gun but that’s not going to mean that we’re going to campaign for the issues that we think are very, very important in those negotiations.

AM: When we talked 18 months ago you were very clear that collective responsibility was very important at cabinet. It seems to have collapsed completely in the Labour Party. All those people who rebelled are going to get a stiff letter which is not going to exactly terrify them.
TW: Well look, we’ve had people leave the shadow cabinet over it and I think it was right that the shadow cabinet needed to take a collective leadership position. But dare I call it –

AM: So was Clive Lewis right to resign?
TW: Well, he was right to resign if he felt that he needed to vote against Article 50. I’m not sure if his timing was particularly helpful, he could have gone when the others went, but that was Clive’s decision and I respect the view that he wants to spend the next five years campaigning for his constituency, Norwich, and I thought it was also very helpful that he’s ruled himself out of a leadership link because there was rampant speculation about that in the press.

AM: Tell us a little bit about the John Trickett story in the Sunday Times, this sense that Labour has been putting potential leadership candidates in front of focus groups, testing them out. Thinking ahead for some kind of change in leadership.

TW: Well I only saw this story last night, Andrew –
AM: What did you make of it?
TW: Well people tell me that that isn’t the case. It wasn’t road testing leadership candidates. There was a range of shadow cabinet members there were so called ‘road tested’ and that this is what we do in our normal run of sort of parliamentary political consultations. I’m just slightly relieved they weren’t road testing me on the document that was leaked to the newspaper.

AM: Now let’s look a little bit at the polling for Jeremy Corbyn, because we have to come to the elephant in the room a little bit. And there is the favourability ratings. There’s Theresa May way up there and Jeremy Corbyn down here on minus 40, among the group most likely to vote, over 65. He’s now on a pari minus 113. Catastrophic ratings. Doesn’t there come a point when it is your duty in the Labour Party to speak out?
TW: Look, Jeremy knows what he has to do to win an election and he will make that decision. But let me say to you here Andrew, this is not the time for a leadership election.

AM: I do understand that.

TW: I mean he you know – he got a second mandate from our members last year, he is now the established Leader of the Labour Party. It is his duty to lead the official opposition through a period of unprecedented economic uncertainty and he will be tested in that.

AM: He has worked like a Trojan, he’s worked very hard, he’s done everything he can think of doing and it’s still not working. How do you explain those figures?

TW: Well he has to explain those and he has to sort of – he has to improve on them and he’s well aware of that, but it’s not for me to judge him on a TV show like this.

AM: Absolutely not.

TW: It’s for him to make that decision.

AM: Are you talking privately to him about this?

TW: I talk to him every day about a whole range of issues and, you know, I talk to him about what I think we need to do to win the general election as you’d imagine any Deputy Leader would.

AM: Absolutely, but do you talk about the depth of the hole?

TW: I don’t refer to it in those terms, but I do talk about the issues that I think Labour needs to address if we’re going to sort of narrow that poll gap.
AM: And how important is to the Labour Party to hold Stoke and Copeland?

TW: Well winning by elections is obviously a good thing for political parties –

AM; Crucial, surely?
TW: I don’t know whether we’re going to win these by elections or not, but the campaign team on the ground are running a good campaign. We’ve got two good candidates in Gareth Snell and Gillian Troughton and you know, they’re quietly confident that we’ll get a good end result.

AM: Finally and briefly, if you may, for the opposition do you have confidence in John Bercow as Speaker?

TW: Oh, absolutely, yes. He’s one of the great Speakers the House of Commons has seen. He doesn’t speak for the government, he always speaks for himself, but he gives back benchers their voice and that’s what this parliament needs right now.

AM: Now one thing that people say is that Jeremy Corbyn will not stand down as Leader until he feels there’s a decent chance of another left candidate becoming Leader. And that means that he wants and other people want a change in the Labour rules so that fewer MPs need to nominate. But you on the other hand want to return to the old Labour system where all parts of the party are involved in the leadership. Explain.

TW: I think that’s a good starting point but I think what’s most important is that we get our system of electing the next Leader out of the way before we start electing that Leader, which is part of the problem we had last September and I don’t want to go through that again.
AM: I’m sure you don’t. Tom Watson thanks so much.

ENDS