NICK ROBINSON:
Now moving on, “They’re all the same” - that is the most often heard complaint about politicians. But I suspect people wouldn’t say that if they knew the remarkable story of the former Labour cabinet minister Alan Johnson. He grew up in West London’s Notting Hill long before it was considered chi-chi or fashionable, at a time when the area was synonymous with slum landlords and race riots. His first home was condemned as unfit for habitation; and after his mother died, tragically young, he was brought up by his older sister even though she was just a teenager herself. We can now all read that fascinating story in Alan Johnson’s new memoir, ‘This Boy’, and we’ll talk about that to Alan in just a few minutes. But first, as a former home secretary, I just want to get your thoughts really about this week. When you heard news of the attack, were you taken back to those days when you must have seen security service files about the threat of extremism and the fears you surely must have had that it could happen?
ALAN JOHNSON:
Yes and I shared everybody’s horror, of course, but having been in that position myself, I knew the importance of actually piecing together the whole story of this and not acting prematurely. And one thing’s for sure - it might be nice weather this Bank Holiday, but Theresa and her colleagues won’t be getting any rest. It’s a huge pressure on a home secretary when this happens, and, quite rightly in a democracy, to try to find what happened and try to ensure that the people responsible are brought to justice.

NICK ROBINSON:
But the fear of the lone wolves, if that’s what they turn out to be, was that something you were aware of when you were home secretary a few years ago?

ALAN JOHNSON:
Yes.

NICK ROBINSON:
That even if you were very successful - as the security services seem to have been in disrupting plots - the threat would come through another way?

ALAN JOHNSON:
Yeah. And so-called “skins” who are people who are just new to all this and there’s no record. Well now another three people have been arrested and it looks like it’s wider than just a couple of lone wolves, but that’s the point about making sure you piece everything together. But that is a fear. And I heard Eric Pickles the other day on the radio, and I think he’s absolutely right. In a free democracy, there are limits to the kind of curtailment you can put on people’s activities. It’s much easier in places like China, for instance.

NICK ROBINSON:
And you must have constituents who come up to you and say, “Why don’t they just …? Why don’t they just ban the hate preachers, why don’t they just arrest these guys with placards? Why don’t they stop the internet?” Are you using that when you were home secretary, you looked at those things; it’s harder than that?
ALAN JOHNSON:
Yes. And of course it’s getting the balance right. Actually the organisation that this guy was a member of, I did proscribe back in 2009. But when you proscribe, when you ban an organisation, in a democracy you have to go through a very rigid process and be absolutely sure that it’s not counterproductive. In that case it was, but the famous case of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which David Cameron said in his Conservative Party manifesto they would proscribe - well when David Cameron got into office and saw all the information, they still remain three years later un-proscribed. And I’m not criticising David Cameron for that. It is a very, very important measure to be taking in a democracy; and in the case of this organisation, I thought it was absolutely right to do that, but you know you could end up in a situation where you drive people underground and you don’t get the intelligence.

NICK ROBINSON:
Well, as you know, the Government are now saying they’re reviewing this so-called Prevent strategy to deal with extremism. Now your old colleague Hazel Blears is in The Observer this morning saying look the Government have cut its budget and they’re now beginning to focus only on the extremists rather than funding as it were the moderates to help them grow.

ALAN JOHNSON:
Yes.

NICK ROBINSON:
Now Theresa May will have her answer to that, but do you fear that that mistake’s being made?

ALAN JOHNSON:
I do. I mean it was very early days of Prevent. I came into the home secretary position in 2009 and it had literally been launched for a couple of months. But the idea was … There’s a very important book by Ed Hussein called ‘The Islamist’, and Ed Hussein told the story of how he was radicalised in his community. And part of the strategy, the Prevent arm, was to get into those communities and to try to ensure that young
people who were susceptible to this kind of radicalisation had the arguments and had
the opposite arguments. That can’t come from the home secretary and it can’t come
from counter-terrorism experts or politicians. It has to come from people in the
community. It’s a difficult balance to get right, but I think it does have to be.

NICK ROBINSON:
So will you be saying think again to the Government?

ALAN JOHNSON:
Well I don’t want to make a political point of this actually, but I think they will be
thinking again anyway, and I would think Theresa is fighting hard for her budget
within the Home Office. You know, the first role of government is to protect its
people, and that’s the last area where you should be looking for savings if the people
involved say this will damage our ability to protect the public.

NICK ROBINSON:
Now there is one area where a lot of people have said think again. Your old
colleague, former home secretary John Reid, said think again about the Data
Communications Bill - what some people call the snooper’s charter – the way of
monitoring that internet traffic and so on. Are you one of those …

ALAN JOHNSON:
I am.

NICK ROBINSON:
… who believe it was a mistake to abandon this?

ALAN JOHNSON:
I am absolutely passionately one of those people. Look, this isn’t a knee-jerk reaction.
For six years at least, we’ve known that as telecommunications has moved on and
sophistication has moved on, the security forces, who need to know not to open these
communications - that’s a completely different process that has nothing to do with
this - it’s to know who’s been contacting who. I am absolutely with the home
secretary on … because I feel very, very … I’m absolutely confident she’ll be fighting
for this. We need to get this on the statute book before the next General Election, and I think it’s absolutely crucial. Indeed I think it’s a resignation issue for a home secretary if the cabinet do not support her in this central part of what the security service is doing.

NICK ROBINSON:
Well we’ll ask her just that in just a second. But we originally asked you to come here because of this fascinating book. For people who don’t know and haven’t yet read the book, this is the story of an extraordinarily tough upbringing. Now as people see the stills of you on the streets of Notting Hill, you look a sweet enough kid, if you don’t mind me saying …

ALAN JOHNSON:
(over) Thank you very much. Always was.

NICK ROBINSON:
(over) There you are with your mum and your sister. It wasn’t like Notting Hill these days, was it?

ALAN JOHNSON:
It wasn’t, no, and there were lots of people in the same circumstances as I was. But you mentioned that the house we lived in in Southam Street was condemned. It was condemned in the 1920s, 1930s as unfit for human habitation and we were still inhabiting it in the 1950s. And it was a street that was captured by the famous photo journalist Roger Mayne who was actually photographing it in the mid-50s when we were living there, and it was squalid and it was typically sixteen people to a house, one or two families on every floor, no running hot water of course, no indoor toilet, no bathroom, no electricity, just gas.

NICK ROBINSON:
And when you wanted to get coal in order to stay warm, what did you have to do?

ALAN JOHNSON:
Well my mum used to take us round behind – usually a horse and cart actually still
delivering coal to the houses at the top end of Holland Park, the kind of more prosperous areas, and we used to pick up bits of coal and she used to order us to spit on it and … You know she had these funny little methods did my mother. And that was a way of pillaging it rather than buying it, you know. But I mean it had fallen on the ground, so it was there for any …

NICK ROBINSON:
(over) It was there on the ground.

ALAN JOHNSON:
(laughs) Yeah.

NICK ROBINSON:
I think perhaps the most poignant story in the book is that Christmas lunch that went wrong. Your mother was ill in hospital.

ALAN JOHNSON:
Yeah. Well this shows how extraordinary my sister was. I mean this is a story of two amazing women who happen to be my mother and my sister. But my mother had gone into hospital. She had a heart complaint all her life. She was in hospital one Christmas. She’d paid tuppence a week for a Christmas hamper, as lots of people did, and she left a pile of shilling pieces to put in the gas. My father who the word ‘feckless’ could have been invented for, he didn’t come home (we were expecting him) so my sister decided to cook the Christmas dinner. So she put … She was ten by the way. She put the chicken in the oven without realising that you’re supposed to take the plastic wrapper off and there was a terrible smell. But she tried.

NICK ROBINSON:
It now makes you smile. At the time, it must have made you weep. I don’t want to leave you without just asking a little bit about current politics, though just one last one on the book. Do you ever worry that your background made you underestimate yourself? You once famously said on Desert Island Discs you weren’t … Fit wasn’t the word you used but to be Prime Minister. Lots of your colleagues thought you were and still want to see you back …
ALAN JOHNSON:
(over) I don’t know.

NICK ROBINSON:
… in the frontline of politics.

ALAN JOHNSON:
There’s this thing about people who go to university getting a certain confidence and a trained mind and all that. Maybe that’s part of it. Not so much a poor background as not having gone to university. That might have been a part of it. I remember Shirley Williams saying very famously that she felt unable - and she felt it was because she was a woman - to have the confidence to do that job.

NICK ROBINSON:
Well have the confidence now. Can you come back to the front bench?

ALAN JOHNSON:
(laughs) I could come back to the front bench. You know really I did that for eleven years and it was a lot of fun while it was lasted.

NICK ROBINSON:
What about a quick tip to those who succeeded you? You have said again and again it’s time for a bit of policy.

ALAN JOHNSON:
Well no, I’ve said don’t go too quickly on the policy. You know we know the election’s going to be in 2015, but you do have to show a bit of leg. So you do need as you move closer to that area and actually it’s surprising how much policy is actually out there.

NICK ROBINSON:
What about spending in particular has been a real worry; that Labour’s economic message - you used to be in charge of it as shadow chancellor - hasn’t got across?
Time to spell it out a bit?

**ALAN JOHNSON:**
Well I think we are spelling it out, but of course the IMF came this week. I know they couched it in very diplomatic language, but they were virtually saying the same thing as I was saying as shadow chancellor: if you overdo the austerity, you choke off growth and you lead to greater problem with the economy.

**NICK ROBINSON:**
Alan Johnson, fascinating to talk to you.

**ALAN JOHNSON:**
Thanks.

**NICK ROBINSON:**
The book is a great read. Thank you very much indeed.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**