THE ANDREW MARR SHOW

INTERVIEW:

TOM WATSON, MP
LABOUR, DEPUTY LEADER

SEPTEMBER 13th 2015

ANDREW MARR:
And here’s a thought: at the time of the next election, Jeremy Corbyn will be exactly the same age that Keith Richards is now. Speaking of which, I had hoped to talk to Jeremy Corbyn this morning. He had other things to do. And, as it happens, the Israeli Prime Minister Mr Netanyahu also bailed out, so at least there is something that the two of them agree on. But we’re delighted to have Mr Corbyn’s new deputy, Tom Watson, who is going to be playing a crucial role from now on. Good morning. Now you don’t know Jeremy Corbyn very well, but you’ve seen a lot of him in the last I guess 24 hours or so. What kind of opposition are you going to be? How different is British politics going to feel as a result of all of this?

TOM WATSON:
Well he’s a conviction politician. He’s a very genial man. He knows his own mind. I think he’s quite a determined character who’s spent decades swimming against the tide and he wants to move the party away from one that sort of is a sound bite party to a movement politics party and I …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) How is that going to feel for Labour MPs who are perhaps not his supporters?
A lot of people are worried that they are going to be pushed out back in the 80s, we’ll be back to reselection – MPs pushed out by resurgent local parties. Is that something they should be worried about?

**TOM WATSON:**
I understand the concern of my colleagues in parliament. This is a huge change for the Labour Party; there’s no point in denying this is a huge political realignment too. But Jeremy Corbyn has got a huge mandate from our members …

**ANDREW MARR:**
Massive, yeah.

**TOM WATSON:**
… and we are a membership organisation and something is going on out there. A quarter of a million people have joined us in the last 3 months. But in my conversations with Jeremy, he says he wants to build a very … a broadbased party. He wants a front bench that represents all the talents and all the views, and I want to work with him on that. And so I say to my colleagues you know watch this space, respect the mandate that he’s been given from our members. Try and unify and let’s try and get an exciting programme for 2020.

**ANDREW MARR:**
And those people who within a few hours of him being elected by that huge majority are already talking about a putsch or a coup against him, what’s your message to them?

**TOM WATSON:**
There’s zero chance of that happening. Labour Party members will not accept that. But you know it’s fine for people to leave the front bench – I’ve done it myself a few times -

**ANDREW MARR:**
You have, yeah.
TOM WATSON:
… but you’ve got to have the spirit of unity in your heart when you do it and you want to try and make it work but enjoy the freedom to speak out. I’m sure Jeremy would respect that. And what I do know from my own experience is there’s always someone else that can do a front bench job. There’s plenty of ambitious and talented people in the Parliamentary Labour Party.

ANDREW MARR:
Are we going to see a kind of new regime whereby you can be on the Labour front bench, disagree with the leader about whatever it might be, speak out and not have to resign; there’ll be a rather looser rein?

TOM WATSON:
Well knowing Jeremy’s character as I do, I hope that what he’s trying to create is an intellectually curious party where we can have you know a more creative process of policymaking. We certainly both want to democratise the party. We want to give democracy, you know policy making powers back to our members. And I think in the modern world, you know that’s the only way we’re going to have reaching to some of those communities we lost Andrew, you know. You know there are too many political parties across Western Europe. And you know I look at our opponents. They’re almost shell parties now, they’re kind of run by advisers and people on the front bench. And what we want is a vibrant democracy and we want to relay our roots in every community in these islands.

ANDREW MARR:
I’m trying to get a sense of just how different it’s going to feel. And, for instance, I read – I don’t know if it’s true – that Jeremy Corbyn won’t do Prime Minister’s Questions many weeks and in fact you will be standing in and other people do it for him or instead. Is that right?

TOM WATSON:
Well the one thing I hope we can change is that sort of you know bully boy scoring points at Prime Minister’s Question Time. The Speaker has spoken about this a lot.
ANDREW MARR:
Everybody says that. It never happens.

TOM WATSON:
(over) Absolutely. Well you know I’m with Jeremy on this. I detest Prime Minister’s Question Time. I think it’s a very bad showcase …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) For politics.

TOM WATSON:
… for British democracy and I hope we can work with David Cameron to make it more inquisitive and more thoughtful.

ANDREW MARR:
So is it going to be rotated from your side?

TOM WATSON:
Well that’s up to … I don’t know yet is the honest truth. I think Jeremy’s got to work that out.

ANDREW MARR:
Okay. Right let’s talk about some of the policies and the issues because, for instance, on Trident, I would suspect that you take a very different view not only from Jeremy Corbyn but from that big movement which has been building up through the country behind him who want Trident out?

TOM WATSON:
Yes there are different views. I mean nobody wants to live in a nuclear world, but it’s how you disarm, and I think the deterrent has kept the peace in the world for half a century and I hope we can have that debate in the party. And you know we’ve got to find ways of alighting on policy, and if you’re a democratic party you’ve got to have that debate and I’m sure Trident is one of those issues where we’ll do that.
ANDREW MARR:
But this is difficult for you. You are as it were pro-Trident in the sense that you’ve explained and pro-NATO. Jeremy Corbyn is against Trident and against NATO. You’re going to find it very, very hard to be a loyal deputy to him, as you promised yesterday, when there’s such a gap in view, aren’t you?

TOM WATSON:
Well I need to be honest about where I stand on things. I think NATO has kept the peace in Western Europe for half a century and Jeremy has said that, but he’s also said he’s worried about the Eastern expansion of NATO and I think he’s right to be cautious on that front. But we’ve got to work this out. You know I’ve only been Deputy Leader for about 20 hours.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) I know, absolutely, but he got elected with 60 per cent of the votes on a diametrically opposite view of Trident and NATO than you’ve just expressed.

TOM WATSON:
Well there’s …

ANDREW MARR:
You’re going to have to swallow that, aren’t you?

TOM WATSON:
Well I’ve stood on a platform … I’ve got my own mandate to reform the Labour Party. I think the Labour Party needs organisational change if we’re to win in 2020. But I’ve also been very honest about where I stand in that process and the members have given me my own mandate, and I guess what that says is let’s give our democracy back to Labour Party members and let’s have a democratic decision on that through our own internal mechanisms and we’ll all have to adhere to that.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Sure but …
TOM WATSON:
Now that’s not going to be easy …

ANDREW MARR:
… but on something like NATO - which is a very, very fundamental position, I would imagine for you and the way you’ve expressed it – those people who came into the Labour Party, who were in the Labour Party already and who voted for Jeremy Corbyn didn’t vote for him despite that; they voted for him because they want out of NATO, because they want Trident to go.

TOM WATSON:
I’d be very, very surprised if his mandate from those members is simply on the future of NATO.

ANDREW MARR:
It was a big part of it.

TOM WATSON:
Well I think …

ANDREW MARR:
I mean he’s Chairman of Stop the War Coalition.

TOM WATSON:
There were certainly lots of people on that, but you know I aim to convince him of the merits of NATO. It has kept the peace in Western Europe. It was created by one of Labour’s greatest ever foreign secretaries, Ernest Bevin, because he and his generation came through the Second World War and wanted to keep the peace, and I hope we can have that debate in the party.

ANDREW MARR:
So there is a massive disagreement on this. What do you say to all of those …

TOM WATSON:
(over) Well hold on, I don’t think …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) There must be.

TOM WATSON:
Well let me just … I don’t think there’s a massive disagreement. If I’m being honest with you, I don’t know precisely what Jeremy’s position is, but I know that what I’ve read in the papers is he actually understands that NATO needs to exist. He respects the views of many party MPs and members on this, but he wants to make sure that it doesn’t expand eastwards. But these things have got to be worked out, Andrew.

ANDREW MARR:
He and Stop the War Coalition want to leave NATO and are determined to get rid of Trident. They’re clear about that. What is your message to all the families of British service people for instance watching this who are deeply alarmed about that aspect of the new Labour world?

TOM WATSON:
Well those service personnel do a great job for our country and they keep us safe. Actually they deserve greater support - they don’t get paid enough and their terms and conditions are not right and I think Jeremy Corbyn would stand by them on that point - but when it comes to the … when it comes to the nuclear deterrent, that is a debate the Labour Party has got to have.

ANDREW MARR:
This great upsurge of people who’ve come in to join the Labour Party, paid their £3 and so forth, should they now become full members of the Labour Party or does something else need to have to happen?

TOM WATSON:
Well I hope they can come with us on the journey to the election in 2020. I mean I would like them …

ANDREW MARR:
What does that mean, sorry?

TOM WATSON:
Well I’d like them to upgrade themselves from being supporters to members and …

ANDREW MARR:
So they’d have to pay more money to do that?

TOM WATSON:
Well I think that’s … Yes you have to pay a little bit more to be a Labour Party member and I hope we can persuade them to come with us. We’ve both been elected. We want to give them a greater role …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So we can’t have a mass conversion like the Chinese General with his hose?

TOM WATSON:
Well I’m not sure if that would be effective and it might be financially prohibitive. But the general … the general view let’s get these new members involved in campaigning, helping relay our roots in communities, being involved in a digital revolution in the party that allows members to feel that they’re more included in the decisions we make, we want them to be part of that and I don’t think anyone is disagreeing with that.

ANDREW MARR:
Okay one of the other criticisms that’s been made of the process and what’s happened and so forth, and Polly Toynbee referred to it earlier on, is there are no women anywhere near the top of the Labour Party now. In this day and age that’s pretty shocking, isn’t it?

TOM WATSON:
Well I hope that we can have gender parity in our shadow cabinet and Jeremy’s said he’s attempting to do that. He’s starting his …

ANDREW MARR:
That’s what he’s doing now?

TOM WATSON:
(over) … reshuffle, yeah. But for me, we need greater representation from working class people, from communities that aren’t represented in parliament. There isn’t a Sikh in any legislature in the United Kingdom, for example, representing Labour and we need to change that. And actually we need to focus on our local government base. We need more women Labour councillors and more women …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) You do, absolutely do, yes.

TOM WATSON:
That’s what I see as my part of the job.

ANDREW MARR:
Okay. Now there’s a very straightforward criticism made both of you and of Jeremy Corbyn. He is the most vigorous serial rebeller against a Labour whip probably in the party’s history and everyone remembers, if I may say so, your role – not entirely helpful – with a certain Mr Tony Blair back in the old days. How can the two of you ask for loyalty from Labour MPs and shadow cabinet ministers given that?

TOM WATSON:
Well I think certainly with shadow cabinet ministers, the collective responsibility should still apply. But actually the power of our argument should convince our colleagues that they need to stick together through this and that’s why I hope we can unify around this new programme which we will be developing over weeks and months.

ANDREW MARR
One of the first big issues I suspect to hit the House of Commons soon is going to be the Syrian War going on there – the possibility of another vote on that – and of course the legal aftermath of the drone strikes. What’s your view on that?
TOM WATSON:
I’m deeply concerned about the mood music around Syria. One thing I do know as a former defence minister, that any military adviser will tell you that bombing alone will not reach a peaceful settlement to anything.

ANDREW MARR:
So go deeper or pull out really?

TOM WATSON:
Well I think we need to hear what the government’s proposals are. I think we need to know what the mission is, what the exit strategy is, and how much it will cost before we can make a decision on that. But I would be very, very sceptical if David Cameron is only saying we should bomb. You know any military adviser will say if he’s serious about dealing with ISIS, that would require troops on the ground, and I don’t think there is any will on any of the benches in parliament for troops on the ground.

ANDREW MARR:
Can the Corbyn led Labour Party speak with one voice on Europe?

TOM WATSON:
Oh yes, I think so. We believe in a social Europe and for me those hard won rights for workers in Europe that actually John Major signed off …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) The Social Chapter and all of that?

TOM WATSON:
Yeah.

ANDREW MARR:
But that is what is now trying to be stripped out, and there are a lot of people again as it were on the Corbyn side of the party who regard Europe now as a banker’s Europe and actually are quite enthusiastic (as are the Tory right) about pulling out.
TOM WATSON:
Well Europe is the largest trading block in the world. Europe gives harmonisation to our exporters and it gives very strong rights to our workers and it has delivered huge reforms from issues as diverse as the environment to public health.

ANDREW MARR:
So you’ll be yes to Europe, will you?

TOM WATSON:
I will be yes to Europe definitely and I hope we can convince the Labour Party, those sceptics in the Labour Party, that that is where Labour needs to be in the referendum. And we’ve got a great lead with Alan Johnson on that. I hope we can have our own distinct Labour Yes campaign that talks about a social Europe, but yes I think we should be – yes.

ANDREW MARR:
Okay Tom Watson, I think we’re going to see Jeremy Corbyn in a couple of weeks’ time at party conference time, but for now thank you very much indeed for joining us.

TOM WATSON:
Thank you.

ENDS