AM: The Shadow Attorney General, Baroness Shami Chakrabarti is one of Jeremy Corbyn’s key allies. Away from the Brexit debate, Labour’s also been talking a lot about the dangers of rising Islamophobia following the horrifying killings in New Zealand, what are the lessons she thinks need to be learned here in Britain. Welcome Shami Chakrabarti. Now, as I say Islamophobia has been something that your party’s talked about a lot and this happened on the other side of the world. But in terms of the law and our approach here in Britain, what would a Labour government be doing that’s not being done now?

SC: Well I think that this happened on the other side of the world but you and others have pointed out, Ayesha in particular in the paper-review, the world is shrinking and interconnected and the internet is part of that shrinkage. My own colleague Tom Watson has been talking about the role that social media can play in bringing hateful people together and I think that it’s time to really think about whether the internet can be an ungoverned space. You know once upon a time –

AM: People talk about it as the wild west of the media world.

SC: Well quite, and you know, in a sense it’s more like a new continent but we don’t leave new continents just to be regulated by the initial explorers. I think it’s time that we as democrats, both nationally and more importantly internationally, start having a debate about how the internet is going to be democratically governed in a spirit of respecting human rights and the rule of law.

AM: So in terms of what that might actually mean, I think Tom Watson and others have brought about a new regulator for these internet companies and to start to treat them like publishers.
SC: I think there really is something in that. I mean why should broadcast media and print media be subject to so much different standards than new media? I should say also though that mainstream media and indeed political actors like myself have a responsibility in relation to the tone of our discourse. There’s been a lot of controversy about a Newsnight piece that went out on Friday, the day of the massacre where an extreme far-right voice was left essentially unchallenged and I think we all need to just – you know, no recriminations but I do think we all need to reflect on editorial decisions that we make and also on the tone of our discourse: about things like culture wars and invaders and immigration, this ‘othering’ of minorities. It hasn’t all been bleak though. You know I think that – I’m sorry.

AM: We were talking earlier on about the comparisons between some extreme Islamists and someone on the far right. How they’re groomed, how they’re drawn into extremism and so on. Labour’s been suspicious I think is a fair word about the Prevent Programme of this government.

SC: I think there have been aspects of the Prevent Programme that have left too many British Muslims feeling othered and spied upon and so on. That doesn’t mean that we don’t want to prevent terrorism and extremism but we need to think about how we do it.

AM: There’s been a 36% rise I think in far-right groups being applied to Prevent, the Programme, so it’s now looking at both sides very much. Would you keep the Prevent Programme, by and large?

SC: I think it needs to be reviewed and quite possibly reformed because what you don’t want is counterproductive anti-terrorism that makes whole minority communities feel othered, when actually they need to be protected and they need to be unified with everyone. An attack on one minority is an attack on all of us and I think the New Zealand Prime Minister put that incredibly well.
AM: Let’s turn to Brexit now if we could. You may have heard Nick Boles just now saying that he was having quite good talks with Jeremy Corbyn about some kind of customs union-based alternative version of Brexit. In your view is there a majority in the House of Commons for a different Brexit that isn’t Theresa May’s Brexit?

SC: I think we’ve got a much better chance without Mrs May’s approach. And it’s not just her deal, it’s her whole approach I’m afraid. We’ve got a government in chaos. We’ve got a divided country, a divided Conservative Party, a divided Cabinet, a divided House of Commons and what Jeremy’s been trying to do is to use his convening space as Leader of the Opposition to bring people together and try and broker some kind of compromise. Because up and down the country people are just in despair at the shambles of this government’s approach to Brexit and it’s causing great anxiety, great insecurity ultimately about people’s jobs and the economy at a time when we are the most unequal country in Europe and poverty is on the increase.

AM: We’ve also got a political system where everybody says, let’s compromise. And then when you say, will you compromise? They go no, not me, somebody else. So in that spirit can you see Labour compromising on something like the free movement of people to allow a deal to be done across the floor of the House of Commons?

SC: Definitely we are trying to broker a compromise, but one that will protect people’s jobs, the economy and services. And I think there is more appetite for a Labour-type framework than there is for Mrs May’s approach. And her approach has been my deal – her approach has been throughout my way or the highway. First she threatened people with a cliff-edge no deal Brexit is they didn’t back her deal, now she’s threatening the other wing of her party with no Brexit. It’s her deal or the highway. That is not leadership. That is not stoicism, that is hubris and it is
failing people in this country up and down the land. Whether they voted for Leave or Remain this is no way to run a country.

AM: She might yet get her deal through at the third or fourth time of asking. If she does it will be partly because Labour MPs have voted for it because they’re so horrified about the prospect of no deal. What’s your message to them?
SC: I would say don’t be scared into a bad deal for this country because we can come together around a good deal for this country. And as I say, Jeremy has shown his character which is one of gentleness and listening and compromise. You’ve seen those noises even coming from Conservatives like Nick Boles. He has done more in a relatively short space of time to show leadership than Mrs May has done in the last couple of years combined.

AM: Let’s turn to another issue and it’s a live legal case so we have to be very careful about this, but the Bloody Sunday murder case. The government has said that they are going to pay all the legal costs of the former soldier involved. As Shadow Attorney General do you approve of that?
SC: I approve of anyone in this country who’s accused of a serious crime getting full complete five-star legal aid. It’s not about, you know, wannabe prime ministers who are currently Defence Secretary, sort of giving coded messages of support to one defendant or another. It’s about saying anybody who’s been charged with murder, which is the most serious offence in our law should get the best possible defence and it should be paid for by the state.

AM: You’ve just mentioned the Defence Secretary. He wants to go a bit further and change the law to prevent soldiers facing these kind of accusations in the future.
SC: I don’t think we can do that if we believe in the rule of law. That’s equality before the law for everyone. I think it would be a
very dangerous precedent if we started granting blanket immunities to anybody in a particular role or profession. Politician, soldier, police officer, doctor. You know we are all – lawyers – we’re all subject to the rule of law. So yes to Rolls Royce legal aid, but no to blanket immunities or time restrictions on the most serious offences I think.

Ends