ANDREW MARR SHOW, 17TH JULY 2016

OWEN SMITH MP

25:50

AM: Now Owen, you have made a lot of your membership in the past of CND. Tomorrow there is a vote in the House of Commons on Trident. Which way will you vote?

OS: I will vote to renew Trident. I’m a multi-lateralist, Andrew, I believe that the world has actually got more volatile, more insecure over the last few years. I want a world without nuclear weapons altogether, but I don’t believe that we hasten that by divesting.

AM: So, when did you realise you were wrong?

OS: About fifteen years ago. You know, it’s been a long while since I realised that we need to retain it until we can use it as a bargaining chip to get everybody to get rid of their nuclear weapons.

AM: The nuclear deterrent only works of course if the Prime Minister of the day is prepared to press the button and annihilate possibly millions of people. As Prime Minister, would you press the button under certain circumstances?

OS: You’ve got to be prepared to say yes to that, Andrew. That’s absolutely right. And it was a mistake of Jeremy –

AM: Well Jeremy Corbyn says no.

OS: Well it was a mistake of Jeremy to say that. I understand why. Of course it’s a terrible thought for any of us.
AM: He has a principled objection to nuclear weapons. You don’t.

OS: No, that’s not true. I don’t want nuclear weapons. I’m a multi-lateralist.

AM: Hold on just a sec, you’re going to vote for the renewal of Trident.

OS: I am.

AM: But you don’t want the renewal of nuclear weapons. I don’t understand.

OS: I want all nuclear weapons in our country and across the world to be got rid of. I don’t think that we make that more likely by unilaterally disarming ourselves. I don’t think we will succeed in encouraging other countries to do likewise and indeed I think the world has got more volatile. So we’ve got to stick with what we’ve got, we’ve got to renew it if that’s the advice of the security services and it’s awful that we’ve got to do that, but I’m afraid it’s true.

AM: Now you say in today’s papers that you led the crusade against Tax Credits and the battle against the Welfare Bill, but when it came to the Welfare Bill again you abstained. Why?

OS: Well it was a mistake and I regret it and I argued in Shadow Cabinet, as Angela and others can testify that we oughtn’t to be abstaining on it and I was part of Andy Burnham’s campaign telling Andy that he ought to be resigning on the issue. The truth is it was a mistake. I’m pleased that when I then became DWP Shadow Secretary I did lead the campaign, I did change our position. We opposed the Welfare Bill outright, we opposed it line by line. I led the campaign against Tax Credits and we succeeded
in getting those Tax Credits reversals overturned, as we succeeded under my leadership in getting the PIP cuts to disabled people overturned. I’m very, very proud of that, Andrew.

AM: Now you say that you’re a man of the left in Labour Party terms, you’re a left wing candidate. Would you raise taxes on the people at the top of society, the richest, in order to do the things that the people at the bottom of society desperately need doing?

OS: I think we need to completely overhaul our tax system. I think one of the things –

AM: Tell me about that then.

OS: So yes. I think the reality is one of the things that we’ve been far too timid about in the Labour Party for a long time is our taxation system. It isn’t progressive. People at the lower end of the income spectrum –

AM: So higher income tax for the rich?

OS: Well, I think certainly I’d go back to a 50p rate tomorrow, because I think that is absolutely the right thing to do, but there are other elements of taxation. Why on earth are capital gains being taxed at 20% when the highest rates of income tax are at 45%? That seems to me to be completely anomalous, it doesn’t seem to be progressive. It’s not Labour I think for us to have that sort of a tax system. I’d want to get into that and the benefits system. We should be thinking about this thing far more holistically and be much more radical about it.

AM: Angela Eagle was talking about Article 50 and all of that. If you became Labour leader and Article 50 had not been triggered by the time of the next election – both possible things – would you go into that election saying, do you know what, as the Labour
Party we will not trigger Article 50? In other words, we will not leave the EU. That would open the Labour party out to that 16 million people who voted to remain and could be a hugely popular thing, but it would be a danger for you too?

OS: Well I’d like to be able to say that because I’m a proud European and I think we are much better off at the heart of Europe. But I think it will test -

AM: Like to is not quite the same as saying it.

OS: Well let me finish. I think it will depend on what we’ve seen as being the outcome of these Brexit negotiations. In my view people voted with good faith on either side of that, but let me finish if I may. But I don’t think many people in this country knew precisely what the outcome was going to be. We’ve now got a period over the next 18 months to look at it, to determine it’s whether what we want and we can trust the British people again.

AM: Forgive me, I’m asking something slightly different because we only get the outcome of the negotiations after we have triggered Article 50. Now if Article 50 is delayed until after a General Election, if Theresa May looks at the chaos in the Labour Party and says, do you know what, I’m going to go for a General Election and Owen Smith is the leader of the Labour Party, you could go into election saying, do you know what, if you elect me I will not trigger Article 50 and therefore there won’t be those negotiations and we won’t leave the EU.

OS: Well I think that will be very tempting for the Labour Party because we are a party that believes in being at the heart of Europe. But I say again –

AM: I’m tempted to ask you a little bit further. It’s very tempting, would you do it?
OS: Well I don’t think it’s a binary choice –

AM: It is a binary choice, you have to say yes.

OS: No, it isn’t because the reality is we don’t know what those terms are going to look like. Now if it’s next month and I think it will be very difficult for the Labour Party after people have voted –

AM: But there won’t be terms at that stage.

OS: And that’s my point. We need to come to some idea of what we’re actually getting. I wouldn’t go out and buy a car without checking it had an engine. I think we need to check exactly what we’re going to see out of Brexit.

AM: Okay. So Labour under you would go into those negotiations as the Tories are now after an election. You wouldn’t try and do anything dramatic to reverse the outcome of the referendum?

OS: No. I think we need to negotiate right now, I don’t think we should accept that we’re on a definite path out. I think we need to make sure that people are satisfied with that. We trusted people, rightly, to take the decision, we can trust them again in 18 months’ time to check whether it’s absolutely what they wanted.

ENDS