AM: Angela Rayner, you’ll have seen the reports that the government is reopening the whole issue of student fees. Do you welcome that?

AR: Well we’ve had three announcements of reviews in the last 12 months and 8 years of the Conservatives that have damaged higher education and totally decimated our further education infrastructure, so another review really isn’t going to solve the problem of the hike in interest rates which this government has done and the tripling of tuition fees. And of course most students have said that the removal of maintenance grants is one of the biggest barriers to them at university at the moment and the government have said nothing on that.

AM: Are there more children from disadvantaged backgrounds going to universities after tuition fees arrived or not?

AR: Well there’s more students per se going.
AM: Many more. Many more.
AR: There’s more students going into university but we also know that more students and in particular the disadvantaged students are leaving university with over £50,000 of debt. So actually more students are leaving university not getting into the jobs that they want and being saddled with debt for many years and the system is completely unsustainable. And the government, quite frankly, are not leading on this. They’re being led by the Treasury Select Committee, by the Opposition who have a vision for the future which will ensure that we do have the skills we require in our economy and that further education also gets the parity esteem
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which you spoke about earlier in the programme, instead of the cuts that they face, because we know we need higher education and further education in this country to ensure that our economy grows in the future.

AM: There is a suggestion in these interviews that different kinds of courses at university would be more or less expensive. That Humanities, so called, English and History and Social Sciences would be cheaper degrees than sciences or maths. What do you think about that?

AR: Well, we’re told that we need science and maths and therefore to make those degrees more expensive flies in the face of what our economy’s going to need in the future and as part of our industrial strategy we need to make sure that we preserve and ensure that we get those students on those courses. And of course many of those courses are cross subsidised by other courses within the sector, so making fees different levels is actually going to cause more cause on the sector. What we’ve said is by ensuring that we directly fund universities by making sure their money comes straight from the state through Corporation Tax is those universities would have the money to continue to have a world class university system.

AM: Last time we talked Angela Rayner you said you’d brought along a very big abacus to work out the cost of wiping out all historic student debt. Is that still an aspiration for your party?

AR: Well Jeremy said that he’d want to look at that, but of course what we’ve outlined is a clear vision for a national education service which I think is important because what we’ve said is it will be free at the point of use from cradle to grave. We know that our economy faces real challenges in the future and our businesses do. We’ve got to make sure that have the skills in the economy to
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go forward and that means making sure that people can retrain, people can to university, can get higher education as well as further education and of course the technical skills that we need for the economy of the future. We have a vision for that. Unfortunately the Conservatives have been managing the decline, they've taken their eye off the ball and we've had 8 years of an unsustainable Tory failure on education.

AM: But it might be the case that a £100 billion to wipe out all historic student debt is not a priority, given all the challenges that you face if you come into government soon.

AR: Well like today I've outlined the facts that at the moment our schools are currently not the safest for your young people and children because the government have still not proposed to put sprinklers in schools. We have flammable cladding on schools, we have asbestos in our schools, so we've been prioritising making sure that our school children are safe, that our classroom have the funding and the qualified teachers in order to deliver on our skills and our future for our economy. So our priority at the moment has been to make sure that we get those students into education and that we can provide the workers of the future and the economy that our country needs.

AM: So an awful lot of people will agree with you about sprinklers in schools for instance. Presumably you are worried about the possibility of a Grenfell happening in a British school. But I must ask you how much this is going to cost and is this new money that you're going to put in because you're going to have to rip up quite a lot of school building and remove walls and put in new cladding. It's quite a big operation.

AR: Yeah and the National Audit Office they said that schools needed around 14 billion and the government unfortunately has
only earmarked 4 billion for that. We said that its capital investment and that we would borrow to ensure that that investment is within our schools. So we said we’d put 13.8 billion into making sure that our schools are up to that good standard. And that’s what our children deserve. We can’t have children in unsafe school environments you know. Many schools now the buildings falling apart, they’re not fit for purpose. We have Portacabins where children are faced with – in temporary classrooms. That’s got to stop. We need to invest in education.

AM: Now you’re up in Leeds for this Policy Summit and people have seen some fairly extraordinary scenes on the stage where the kind of factionalism which has been bubbling inside the party broke out. Do you think the scene where the female chair of the National Policy Forum was shut up by a male colleague was a disgraceful one?

AR: Well I’ve known Katrina for many years as a former UNISON colleague of mine and Katrina won’t be shut up by anybody, she’s a fabulous colleague. And you know we have robust debates in the Labour movement and actually we’ve had a fantastic Policy Forum where we’ve debated and talked about the issues that we face as a country. And unlike the Conservative Conference which looked like a wake –

AM: I’m sure it has been.

AR: - ours is all lively and about making sure we have the you know response for the future.

AM: It’s certainly lively. Now Katrina wanted a vote to be taken on the new Chair and that was stopped because the wrong candidate was going to win. Is that right?

AR: Well my understanding was that the notification for Chair hadn’t been given enough time, so therefore it wasn’t a question
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of whether we have a Chair or elect a Chair it was a question of when we do that to ensure that the maximum participation from delegates was able to take place. So my understanding was completely different to that.

AM: Lucy Powell, one of your colleagues said that it was bullying and she said, ‘this smacks of old school control freakery, not new politics.’ She’s right, isn’t she?

AR: Well I didn’t recognise that. I’ve been at the Policy Forum all weekend and we’ve had an energy and you know the atmosphere is much like it was at Conference in September and that’s about we’re a government in waiting. We’ve got the answer for our future of our economy and for the future of Britain and that we’re focusing on that and not internal fighting.

AM: One final question – 20 thousand Labour Party members have now written to you saying that they want a proper discussion about the party’s policy on Brexit. Are you going to carry on not listening to them?

AR: We’re also discussing Brexit, Andrew and you know we’ll be discussing it today at the Policy Forum as part of our International Commission, so we always discuss Brexit. It is something that as you know on your programme you don’t do a programme where it’s not discussed. In the Labour Party it’s constantly discussed at every level.

AM: We do discuss it constantly, Angela Rayner thanks very much indeed for talking to us.

Ends