ANDREW MARR SHOW
18TH MARCH 2018
SHAMI CHAKRABARTI

AM: Can I start by asking you very clearly do you think that Vladimir Putin’s government was responsible for what happened in Salisbury?
SC: What I think is what Theresa May has said, which is that there’s a responsibility of the regime either in relation to having lost control of this chemical weaponry, or it’s even more serious and it’s a malevolent, directed attack. And that’s an important distinction going forward because you’re not going to get cooperation from a state that has deliberately targeted you. But you might get cooperation, even from a slightly embarrassed state that has lost control of its stocks of chemical weapons. And I think that’s an important distinction, and that’s the distinction that Jeremy was making. But it’s also a distinction that Theresa May has made herself.

AM: So to be absolutely clear, when Boris Johnson says it’s overwhelmingly likely that it was Putin himself and other states have agreed with him, you don’t agree?
SC: Well, if Mr Johnson is saying that he must be saying that on the basis of new evidence that Mrs May has not yet spoken about.

AM: So at the moment, so far as you’re concerned, it is not absolutely clear that this was directed by the Kremlin?
SC: That’s my understanding. It’s either a loss of control, which by the way is pretty serious, including under the International Chemical Weapons Convention and needs to be sorted out, if that’s the issue. Or it is what the Foreign Secretary is suggesting. But if he is suggesting that, that would be on the basis of new evidence that’s not been shared with Jeremy Corbyn, and it’s not what Mrs May has said to date.
AM: Because a lot of the world seems to have taken the same view. In France, the United States, Germany, have all said that they think it was Putin who’s responsible for this.

SC: Have they really, though, said Mr Putin directly, individually –

AM: The Russian state.

SC: Yeah, but that’s my point. You said to me earlier we need to be forensic about this, and I think we do. The Russian state is responsible for its stocks of chemical weapons or historic stocks of chemical weapons. Your responsible whether you lose control or whether you personally direct extra-judicial killings.

AM: But are very, very different of course.

SC: Indeed. But you’re responsible in any event. But what kind of culpability and what kind of responsibility is it? That’s important.

AM: Absolutely. So if you are not yet sure that it was the Russian state doing this themselves, why were you supporting the expulsion of 23 diplomats?

SC: Because it’s a proportionate escalation. It’s part of the diplomatic dance, if you like. Even if you’re trying to get cooperation for a criminal investigation going forwards. But I think that Jeremy was right to support that proportionate escalation, but also to say there’ll be a tit for –

AM: It’s not quite logical though, is it?

SC: I think it is. Because diplomacy, you know, has a element of protocol and dancing within it. But the crucial thing is to go further now and that is John McDonnell’s suite of economic measures, and also, I think – and I’m here to say – also to pursue the Chemical Weapons Convention and potentially to ask for inspections, challenge inspections and if necessary further action at the international level.

AM: Let’s look at the alternative theory, which is that this material leaked out or was sold during the dissolution of the Soviet Union from some Russian facility and was acquired by some kind of
mafia gang or other group of some kind. Have you any evidence that that happened at all?

SC: All that we have is what we’ve been told, and what my Privy Councillor colleagues like Jeremy have been told by the government, and what we have been told is what Mrs May has said. She’s outlined the two possibilities. That is the directed attack from the Kremlin, or the loss of control. And all we have done – all we have –

AM: This appears to be entirely supposition at this stage.

SC: We are just repeating what we have been told, because of course we’re not in government. But we’re just repeating what has been shared with us in security briefings and what Mrs May has said.

AM: We seem to be into a sort of tit for tat process now. They’ve expelled 23 of our diplomats and closed down the British Council in St Petersburg, and we are then going to respond to that. How concerned are you about where we are going in this crisis?

SC: I would personally caution against much more tit for tat in that way. I actually agree with Jane Moore, something she said earlier, which is isn’t it important to go, for example, for economic measures that apply not just to Russians but apply to dirty money and non-tax paying money, regardless of the nationality of those involved?

AM: Quite a lot of your colleagues are not happy, at least with the tone of what Jeremy Corbyn said. Nia Griffith has said, the Defence Spokesperson, has said that Russia was definitely responsible. Sir Keir Starmer has said there should be no ifs nor buts, Russia should be called out.

SC: And I agree with all of that, and by the way, you know, Nia Griffith sent me a good luck text before I came on here, so there is no difference between us. I repeat, Russia is looking responsible whether it’s negligent responsibility in not keeping control of these weapons, or whether this is an extra-judicial
killing and attack. And, but the distinction between the two types of Russian responsibility is still important going forward.

AM: A lot of Labour MPs were concerned enough to put down motions and so forth. Your colleague Chris Williamson has called them ‘enemies’ and said they should be de-selected. This sort of cultural war inside the Labour Party is bubbling up on this issue. Are you at all concerned that this is the moment when the crack will start to become unbridgeable?
SC: No. And I am here to make clear that I am completely at one, not just with Jeremy but with Nia Griffith, Emily Thornberry, Keir Starmer. We must condemn Russian responsibility, whether it is negligent of whether it is even more serious. But in order to be safer and in order to take control of these chemical weapons and to eliminate them from the world you do need to make a distinction between negligence in taking back control and something that could be even more serious, which is directed attacks against people on our territory.

AM: Quite a lot of you colleagues look at Jeremy Corbyn’s office and they see Seumas Milne and what he has said about Russia in the past and they see Andrew Murray who’s arrived from the Communist Party quite recently, and they just don’t feel that he is speaking for them.
SC: Well, I think people shouldn’t be directing attacks on staff, it’s kind of not fair to pick on people who can’t sort of speak for themselves. Jeremy is the leader of our party, but he also has a very strong team of Shadow Cabinet colleagues, some of whom you’ve cited, and we are all at one in the approach that I have just outlined.

AM: So when it comes to people like the father-in-law of the police officer who was poisoned in Salisbury, who said that he found Mr Corbyn was mealy-mouthed and disappointing when it came to Russia, what do you say to, as it were, people outside
the bubble, who are looking in from the outside and just not quite sure about the tone?

SC: Well, look, I think that the tone is also spun – whether it’s Jeremy Corbyn’s tone, which I think has been robust but also appropriately measured, or whether it’s the Defence Secretary, who one minute does talk about proportionality but then says, ‘shut up and go away,’ this is a very febrile moment and I think people’s words do get spun by the media and so on. That’s understandable. I’m not going ballistic about that. But obviously people are concerned, people are worried, and that’s why there’s a responsibility on all of us to try and get our tone right.

AM: Do you trust our intelligence services on this?
SC: I do.
AM: So there’s no need therefore to send the Russians evidence of the nerve agent used? We can accept their word that it was Novichok?
SC: No, no, here’s the thing about sending agents beyond this country, either possibly to the Russians if they’re asking for it, or to –
AM: To the organisation for prevention.
SC: The reason for doing that is because it’s the protocol of the Convention. And I believe in pursuing these investigations under international law, because that’s how you garner the broadest international coalition to get support going forward.

AM: Do you think in the last couple of days there has been a McCarthyite atmosphere in this country?
SC: I don’t want to make things worse. I want to make things better. So I’m not going to escalate my language at this point, if you’ll forgive me.

AM: Okay. Jeremy Corbyn suggested there was a sort of McCarthyism about and certainly he has had a lot of abuse hurled at him over this.
SC: He has had a lot of abuse hurled at him for a very long time, and I try to learn from his dignity under fire.

AM: There is reports today of a new group of Labour MPs called Start Again or something, which is a kind of centrist, pro-European group who are very exercised about this issue and about others. Are you at all concerned that we are heading towards a position where the Labour Party might split?

SC: I’m not too concerned. People have always had their democratic prerogative to experiment with new parties and there’s been talk – in the Westminster bubble there’s been talk about this –

AM: It’s gone on and on and on, and it’s never happened, but at some point if might.

SC: Well, in past decades there’ve been experiments in new parties, but the Labour Party is a very fine and broad coalition, and I actually think it represents the new moderation in British politics, like taking on dirty money, like protecting people’s jobs and services. I think that I am a moderate and pretty much always have been.

(ends)