INTERVIEW WITH JOHN McDonnell

ANDREW MARR SHOW, JOHN Mc DON NELL, 22ND JANUARY, 2017

I/V JOHN Mc DONNELL

AM: That is the big problem, isn’t it, you have got passionately pro Remain and passionately pro Brexit people inside the Labour Party and they both want to hear totally different messages from you. It makes it very, very hard to have a coherent message.

JM: It’s a challenge. It’s a challenge and I think Jeremy Corbyn’s taken quite a courageous position in terms of he recognises that you’ve got to bring the country together at some stage and it will be over a traditional British compromise. That will come further down the line almost inevitably. But we’ve got this divide. It isn’t just in the Labour Party, it’s right the way across the country as well. You’ve got the Liberals who basically are arguing that they want a second referendum to overturn the last one, you’ve got Brexiteers, hard Brexiteers in terms of the Tories and UKIP who basically want to take us out and ignore the rest of the population. Somewhere along the –

AM: And you’re in the middle of the road, but you’re not Nye Bevan sitting in the middle of the road.

JM: I’ve never been Nye Bevan, but somewhere along the line there will be a sensible compromise and it will be the Labour Party that will be driving that compromise, bringing sides together. Now that’s – of course it’s a tough decision to make but it’s the right decision to make and it’s a leadership decision that Jeremy Corbyn’s made rightfully I believe.

AM: Let me ask you about what the Prime Minister has said this week because she laid out her plans for Brexit –

JM: well it wasn’t a plan, it was a speech, it wasn’t a plan.
AM: It wasn’t a full plan but it gave us a bit more clarity. But she also said that if Britain did not get what we want, if we get a bad deal then we would leave and have an alternative economic model which would involve cutting taxes, cutting business taxes and so forth. Some people have called that a Singaporean model. What’s your reaction to that?

JM: I think it’s a kamikaze approach to negotiations basically because what it would mean is setting us up as a tax haven. That would effectively cut us off from the rest of Europe and actually would cause us problems with other trade agreements across the world. It would destroy our industrial base and as well undermine our services as well. I think – I honestly think –

AM: So do you think it’s a hollow threat?

JM: I think it’s a hollow threat but I also think it’s a dangerous threat. That’s not the way you go into these negotiations. Yes, you need to go with a bit of strength but to exaggerate a threat like that which is unrealisable – and remember what it means as well, it means cutting our corporation taxes down to 12 and a half percent which is the Irish rate. On the House of Commons Library figures in addition to the existing Corporation tax, that on top, take those both together, 120 billion by 2020 given away to corporations. How then are we going to fund our public services and the NHS?

AM: Let me ask you about another internal matter in a sense which is we’ve got the Article 50 vote coming up and more than 40 Labour MPs have publicly expressed their unhappiness about voting in favour of Article 50, because as they see it this is a choice between two bad options, you know, we’re either going to get Theresa May’s deal or we’re going to get the thing we’ve just been talking about. Why should we therefore be helping it to
happen? Now you’re, if I may say so, an old serial rebel yourself. You’re surely not going to whip these people into voting against their consciences.

JM: What we’ll do, step by step, first of all we’ve got to recognise you know the referendum result and parliament should respect that referendum result. We’ve said that all the way through and that’s what we’ll do. But what we’ll try and do as well is ensure that we amend whatever comes through Article 50, whether it’s a motion or a piece of legislation. If you’re interviewing Theresa May could you ask her whether it’s going to be a motion or a piece of legislation, how we can amend it. Because we think there will be a majority across the House of Commons in, not just our party, but working with others and Conservatives as well –

AM: For what?

JM: - well to amend it in such a way that we get proper parliamentary scrutiny. I quite like the idea –

AM: Are you going to be putting forward an amendment in those terms if it comes to the House of Commons saying that you want full parliamentary scrutiny and perhaps looking again at the matter of the single market?

JM: Well, we want to ensure there’s full parliamentary scrutiny throughout the process. Kenneth Clarke came up with a very good proposal during the Questions to Theresa May which I thought was very interesting. He asked the Prime Minister, will there be regular statements and will we be able to vote on them. Because in that way MPs representing their constituents and the British people overall will be able to influence the negotiations as we go along. And in that way I think we’ll arrive at Labour’s position which is a real compromise that will work.
AM: Okay, you’ve got two big challenges in by elections coming up. Stoke on Trent Central and Copeland, both big traditional Labour seats. I asked Jeremy Corbyn last week if he was toast if you lost them. He said, no, no it wouldn’t be toast. In fact it would be a terrible, terrible blow for the Labour Party if, you know, the government – all the issues about the NHS and Brexit and so forth, if a government party was taking seats from the opposition party that’s unprecedented.

JM: Since Brexit you can’t calculate by election results on what’s going on in the past, so what we’ve got to do is fight for every vote and that’s what we’ll do. I’m angry about the statements by Mr Nuttall today, that’s taking Stoke for granted. He’s basically saying he’s going to win it. You do not take the electorate for granted. We will fight for every vote in both by elections.

AM: Sounds to me slightly as if you’re preparing to lose those seats.

JM: No, not at all, not at all. We’re preparing to fight this vote by vote and I think we will win because we’ll have strong local candidates campaigning yes on Brexit, but also on the NHS and remember Paul Nuttall wants to privatise the NHS. I think people will wake up to those threats and as a result I think we’ll win them.

AM: He denies that but –
JM: Well he said it publicly, it’s on the record.

AM: He can have an argument about that. After Brexit, whoever is in charge in Westminster will be able to control immigration with the EU. What would Labour’s policy be in those circumstances?
JM: Well, it’s already the government is going to withdraw from freedom of movement, we know that, so during this process of the next couple of years we’ll try to ensure the government’s accountable on that matter and we’ll try to ensure that it’s a fair system that’s introduced. That it is also, with regard to protection of workers’ rights, there’s no undercutting of wages, etc, so we’ll look to sure this. But also, as is the point Nick Clegg made, we’ll work with our European colleagues as well to ensure there’s a fair system right the way across Europe if we can.

AM: I’ve been talking to quite a lot of Labour voting people over the last few weeks and months up and down the country and there is just a sense at the moment that the Labour Party could be on the edge of a catastrophic collapse of some kind. Nick Clegg was comparing what happened in Scotland with what could happen in the north of England. Is there any part of you who thinks this could be a very, very dangerous period for us?

JM: I think you’re talking to the wrong people. I was out on the streets in Brighton yesterday where we had hundreds of people marching to protect the NHS.

AM: I was talking to people who were out on the streets of Manchester and some of the northern cities and they say the atmosphere is pretty toxic at the moment.

JM: Okay, well let me tell you, I’m a Scouser, I come from Liverpool originally and go home regularly. What’s happening there and what’s happening in the north as well, we realise the serious situation our country’s facing as a result of Brexit. We realise that there will have to be a sensible compromise that protects us all. Particularly jobs, employment, wages and the economy overall, living standards, that’s what we’ll be fighting for and in that way I believe we’ll not only hold onto the support that
we’ve got we’ll grow and you’ll see that in terms of the way in which I think people then campaign.

AM: When will we see it?

JM: Over this next 12 months. This is the most difficult period for us, I accept that. We’ve had – well it’s been 19 months since the General Election. Half of that period has been engaged in leadership elections, so no wonder people see us as a divided party at times.

AM: But next year is a fair ...
JM: It is key, it is key, but let’s make this absolutely clear. Jeremy Corbyn will lead us into the next General Election and we will win that General Election.

AM: Let me ask you about one other thing. You’ll have seen the Trident story in the Sunday Times this morning. Now the suggestion is that one of these missiles misfired badly and there’s been a news blackout and a cover up since. What’s your reaction?

JM: I’ll just put it no stronger than this. People on both sides of the argument on Trident would have expected that to be reported to parliament and the fact that Theresa May didn’t is extremely worrying. And I think questions have to be asked about that.

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