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THE ANDREW MARR SHOW

INTERVIEW:

CHUKA UMUNNA, MP

SHADOW BUSINESS SECRETARY

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ANDREW MARR:

Now Ed Miliband has been on the front pages for all the wrong reasons lately: underwhelming election results, poor opinion polls, anonymous quotes from backbiting colleagues questioning whether he can win the General Election and demanding he leaves the stage if he doesn't. And on top of what's been called "the Ed problem", those polls also suggest that the Tories are more trusted to run the economy than is Labour. So what is to be done? Chuka Umunna is Shadow Business Secretary and one of Ed Miliband's staunchest supporters. Good morning.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Morning, Andrew.

ANDREW MARR:

Now, first of all, I want my owl. (*Umunna laughs*) I hope you're not going to do a u-turn on the owl policy already, are you?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well I don't know where these people get these ideas from. If you're going to hack an account, let's offer something better than an owl. But anyway.

ANDREW MARR:

So no owls?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

No owls, Andrew. I can make that commitment today on your show.

ANDREW MARR:

That's very good to hear. No, that's very bad to hear. Anyway the IMF and everybody else has praised the British economy now – the fastest growing in the industrialised world and so forth, unemployment is falling fast. Is the Labour Party going to carry on simply saying everything is terrible running up to the election or are you going to have to change your tune on the economy?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well we're not saying everything is terrible, but what we are saying is that we need to ensure that more people get to share in the recovery as it settles in. And we know that not just between regions – say you know London and other parts of the economy – but also within regions too, there are far too many people who simply aren't sharing in that. I mean I look at my own constituency in Streatham - and admittedly it isn't necessarily a typical seat – but, yes, we have seen the numbers out of work falling, which has been a fantastic thing. But, on the other hand, I have a situation where on average my constituents are earning £2,300 less than they were in 2010 and in some of my wards I have one in three children living in poverty. So that is the reality.

ANDREW MARR:

So it's about sharing more equitably the growing cake that George Osborne has baked?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well I think many of our businesses and people who work within them would take issue with what you've just said because I think the reason that we've weathered the storm is because of our great British businesses and the employees working in them. And one thing – I mean George Osborne and many of his colleagues smear and denigrate our trade unions, but actually if you ask many of our businesses how they

weathered the storm, it's by reaching agreements with workplace conveners for pay cuts and reduced hours to get through the very difficult, choppy waters we've had over the last few years. So I actually think, you know, our businesses and our employees working in them, they are the reason that we've got through this. But what we need actually now is much more longer term sustainable growth. The problem that we've had in the past is that it's been too fast buck and also it hasn't been properly balanced across all the different regions in our economy.

ANDREW MARR:

So you're going to announce some big changes to economic policy to give more power to the regions?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well look, there ...

ANDREW MARR:

How is that going to work?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well look, there are two things to this. Andrew Adonis, the former Transport Secretary, has been carrying out a big growth review into how we can actually give our city regions and the regions of the UK more power to be the masters of their own destiny, and this is building on some of the proposals of Lord Heseltine who talks a lot of sense in this area. Now he was saying that central government should devolve around 40 billion pounds worth of spending to the regions to let them spend as they see fit.

ANDREW MARR:

And that would go directly to Manchester City Council, Birmingham City Council and so forth?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well all of those local authorities. But we are saying that we would devolve around £20 billion for the same kind of purpose. But in addition to ensuring we empower our

cities, we've got to empower our people, Andrew. The BBC has carried out some very interesting research on this. One in five people in our economy cannot do the four basics online of sending and receiving an email, browsing the internet, filling in an online form. Now there's been a lot of talk about communities who've been disconnected from our global economy and those of course were a lot of those who were voting for UKIP in the local and European elections. And of that mass of people who can't do the things that all of us take for granted, a very large number of them are from those communities. So the next Labour Government, we are going to be absolutely focused on connecting people into the global economy, so they can realise their dreams and aspirations. And we've got Maggie Philbin, the former presenter, BBC presenter, of Tomorrow's World, who's doing a review into this.

ANDREW MARR:

Enough BBC already. Labour isn't trusted on the economy, you're way behind the Conservatives on that, and business doesn't trust you either. You're meeting business leaders I think this coming week. Is there anything that you can give them that you haven't given them ahead to cheer them up?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well I disagree with what you've just said ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) The opinion polls are very clear.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) ... about business leaders. But let's be clear. Of course we're going to have to make some very tough decisions. People should be under no illusions on the tough decisions the next Labour Government would have to make and we're very clear we'll get the public sector finances back into balance. We want to have it on a downward trajectory by the end of the next Parliament. We've said there will be no borrowing to fund day to day expenditure and we're going to take as our starting point George Osborne's spending limits for day to day spending. Now one of the things we are asking for – and there's going to be a vote this week, we're going to put it to a vote in the House of Commons on Wednesday – is for George Osborne to stop being

a coward and allow the Office for Budget Responsibility to audit Labour's plans at the General Election. That is the best way of determining whether or not we'll get ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) We dare you to audit us is what you're basically saying. Now ...

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) Well he is running scared from allowing the Office of Budget Responsibility ... Robert Chote, the Head of it, has said he thinks this is a good idea. Andrew Tyrie, the Conservative Chair of the Treasury Select Committee, said it's a good idea for them to audit our policies.

ANDREW MARR:

Right.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

He is running scared because he is petrified that the OBR will give Labour's plans that clean bill of health I expect it will do.

ANDREW MARR:

You've seen the polling yourself this morning and for the last week or two. Ed Miliband is in a lot of trouble with the voters in terms of his image. Now there's a phrase, I think used by Matthew d'Ancona, which says to be a successful leader these days, you need two things: you need a big, long-term strategy and an idea – which Ed Miliband perhaps does have; but you also need to be able to deal with the passing celebrity culture. You need to be able to have the kind of passing traits and ability to dance around and persuade people, and that he does not have at all.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well, look, I don't agree with that, and I think in some respects that belittles our politics. Look this isn't ... we're not playing some game of Celebrity Big Brother. We're talking about big issues that are affecting all of our different communities - how are we going to pay our way in the world, how are we going to ensure that everybody can achieve their dreams and realise their aspirations. Now I don't think ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) But if 43 ...

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) I mean if Ed is guilty ... if Ed is guilty of focusing on the issues that people really care about and taking a serious, deep, hard, long look at what needs to happen in our economy to change it, then you know fine because that is what he's seriously focused on.

ANDREW MARR:

So why do 43 per cent of Labour supporters want to see the back of him?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well, look, polls go up and down and there are surveys and the rest of it.

ANDREW MARR:

(over) Not in this case, they don't.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

But look, if we spent all our time obsessing about polls and surveys, we wouldn't be doing what we should be doing, which is doing more ... even more than we are already to win back the support that we're already winning back. Let's not forget ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) So those of your ...

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) ... under Ed's leadership, Andrew, the real polls that matter are votes, and we have seen the Labour Party put on over 2,300 more councillors – importantly in the marginal seats we need to gain a majority in the next General Election.

ANDREW MARR:

(over) In the last loc ...

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) And we wouldn't have done that without Ed's leadership.

ANDREW MARR:

(over) In the last local elections everybody said if you get 500 to 600 councillors, you're on course to win the next election.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

No they didn't.

ANDREW MARR:

You got 300.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

No, no, no they don't.

ANDREW MARR:

(over) You didn't do nearly as well as you expected to.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) They were saying that unless we got in the region of 300 ... We were saying look we wanted to get around 150 at least. They were saying unless you get 300 odd, you're not doing very well. We got 300 and now you're saying oh well we should be aiming for 500. But look ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) I was going back to cuttings at the time.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) ... we can talk ... The bottom ... Look, the bottom line here is we went down to our second worst defeat in history in 2010. Now if you'd asked people back in 2010 ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) And you're coming back?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

... whether we would be able to do that after one term in opposition, they would have laughed you out of the park. But this is a serious prospect: a Labour Government next year. Now is it in the bag? No it's not in the bag and that's why we have to ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) Is 35 per cent of the electorate enough for you?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

No, we're aiming for more than that. Let's be absolutely ... There's been a lot of talk about 35 ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) The core strategy and so forth.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) ... there's been a lot of talk about this. It is nonsense. We want to build a big tent. We want to build a big electoral coalition of people in this country to deliver a Labour Government because that is what will make a difference.

ANDREW MARR:

And you think that the strategy that you're using now is absolutely fine – steady as she goes, that nothing needs to change?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well there's no ... Look there's no steady as it goes. I mean we have announced just this week some big policy changes in respect of how jobseeker's benefit is paid to 18 to 21 year olds to end the nonsense of a young person being penalised if they undertake more than 16 hours of educational training in a week.

ANDREW MARR:

Yeah.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

But look, let me say this.

ANDREW MARR:

(over) All of these policies have come out. The polls haven't shifted at all.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well look ...

ANDREW MARR:

Ed Miliband surely has to raise his game?

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well I think look we are doing ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) You all have to raise your game, including him.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

We are all doing very well, in my view, and we need to keep on building on the successes to date to ensure that we get that majority ...

ANDREW MARR

(over) That sounds to me like adopt the brace position.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

No it's not adopt the brace position. Let me just say something about this, Andrew, because I saw the chat about the papers earlier. If you look at the fundamental qualities of Ed that I've seen when I've taken him to ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) He's a very serious and deep thinking man ...

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) He's serious, he is honest ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) ... but he is not connecting with the public.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) ... he is considered as extremely trustworthy, he is considered a man of great beliefs. And in this day and age when people lack confidence in the BBC, in the police, in different institutions in society, I don't think you can dismiss those qualities and just say they don't matter. They're very important, in my view.

ANDREW MARR:

I wouldn't dream of doing it, what I am saying is that he is for whatever reason not at the moment connecting with voters and you're saying there is no problem.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

Well he's talking about the big issues, like I said. People can have the kind of Westminster soap opera parlour chat game, but actually in my constituency ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) This is about voters on doorsteps ...

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) But they don't ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) ... and it's about opinion polls taken way outside the Westminster village.

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) Yes but, Andrew, voters on the doorstep in Streatham don't say to me, "Oh have you seen the latest YouGov poll?" They don't say that to me. They talk to me ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) If you say to them ...

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) ... about the education of their children.

ANDREW MARR:

(over) ... “Is Ed Miliband our future Prime Minister ...

CHUKA UMUNNA:

(over) They talk to me about whether or not they’re going to get jobs. They talk to me about some of the continuing tragic, serious violence we see in my constituency. That’s why I say we mustn’t belittle politics because this is actually about people’s lives; it’s not about the soap opera.

ANDREW MARR:

Absolutely right, absolutely right. Chuka Umunna, thank you very much indeed.

INTERVIEW ENDS