

ANDREW MARR SHOW

24TH FEBRUARY 2019

TOM WATSON

(Following on from Heidi Allen & Luciana Berger)

AM: What's your message to Luciana, you've been listening to that?

TW: Well, I don't think I've got a message to Luciana, although I have said this week that I'm very, very sad to see her go. I think she was bullied out of the Labour Party by a small number of racist thugs, and it's unacceptable. But my message to the Labour Party, to our members, our half million members, is that I know we're in a crisis. The departure of our colleagues is a real blow to us, and we need to understand why they felt they need to go. Because if we're going to be in government we need to address those concerns, and that's the issue, I think, for us in the weeks ahead.

AM: You're widely thought to have been somebody who was talking people down off the ledge, as it were, trying to persuade them not to go – not always successfully, clearly. Do you think there are more people ready to leave the Labour Party?

TW: I think there is an urgent need for us to stop other people feeling they either need to join a sort of centre group that Luciana is now part of, or to go independent, like my other colleagues have. And there are things we need to do to change very, very rapidly, because we need to unite the party because people are desperate for us to challenge Tory austerity after a decade.

AM: Does Jeremy Corbyn need to change?

TW: Of course Jeremy needs to understand that if we're going to be in Number 10 he needs to change the Labour Party, and there are things we need to do. Firstly, we've got to eradicate anti-Semitism, anti-Jewish racism in all its forms. I mean, this week I've had 50 complaints of anti-Semitism from my parliamentary

colleagues that I shared with Jeremy. And for us to address that now, I think he needs to take a personal lead on examining those cases and if necessary recommending to our NEC what has to be done.

AM: You see, I think he was saying the reports that Lord Falconer, who's a very senior figure in the Labour Party, former Attorney General, has been put in charge of dealing with anti-Semitism in the party, Jeremy Corbyn has said again and again and again that he's hostile to anti-Semitism and lots of cases have been heard by the Labour Party and disciplinary letters have been sent. I'm wondering what more he can really be expected to do.

TW: Well, he has said that it's not done in his name. The problem is the test for us, the test for him as a leader, is to eradicate anti-Semitism, and it's not other Labour Party members that will be the judge of that, it's the British Jewish community. And I think he understands now, that if he is ever to be prime minister he needs to rebuild that trust. And the way you do that – yes, Charlie Falconer is a very important appointment, that we get an independent scrutiny over that, but the way he will now have to do that is to review those cases and go to the NEC, where he is in control. They will back him if he says these people need to be thrown out. And that's the only solution now, because time is against us.

AM: He has to do it all himself. Look at all of these cases himself? You've got cases, I think.

TW: I think the situation is so grave now that he understands he needs to make a personal intervention. You know, we appointed a new General Secretary and made it her priority to deal with it, and very patently the Jenny Formby reforms have not been adequate, they have not succeeded, and therefore it requires another sort of push to try and make sure, that as John McDonnell says, one case of anti-Semitism in our Labour Party is unacceptable, and we need a zero tolerance approach to that.

AM: You said in a video this week that the Labour Party desperately needs a kinder and gentler form of politics. What did you think when you saw Emily Thornberry in that clip just now?

TW: Well, I think Emily said that she would rather die than leave the Labour Party. I mean, I was born into the Labour Party, but I think dying is a virtue that is overrated. And I think it's incumbent on all of us to sort of dial down the rhetoric, to try and understand the reasons that people feel they're leaving the main political parties, to try and bring the country back together, that is divided by Brexit. And those are the other two things I think we need to do. Certainly on Brexit we need to reunify our party membership around the conference position that Keir Starmer negotiated last October. And I think that would steady the concerns that our councillors, our MPs and our active members have about the direction we're taking.

AM: And there's going to be a very, very important vote, probably this week, depends what Theresa May does, but probably this week which would allow the Labour Party to back her version of leaving the EU as long as there was a referendum afterwards so that the entire country can vote. What's your view about that?

TW: Well, we're moving in that direction. Certainly our policy –

AM: Labour is moving towards a referendum?

TW: Well, I think we are moving in that direction. Now, conference policy is pretty clear, what we actually want – you know I don't need to rehearse all the stages we've already gone through – what we would prefer is that Theresa May aligns around our red lines, gives us closer economic sort of, you know, closeness to the European Union. But if we can't get that, if we can't get a deal, if we can't get our red lines met, then the conference policy negotiated by Keir Starmer is that we go for a people's vote.

AM: You've been moving towards a people's vote with all the enthusiastic speed of a tectonic plate. When are you actually going to say that we are in favour of this?

TW: Well, negotiations are very difficult, but when Theresa May reaches out and says she wants to try and find a consensus, I think we're duty bound – I think the nation expects us to do that.

AM: So when will that happen?

TW: Well, we need to (talking together) It might be, but we've not seen all the amendments that we've yet to vote on. So we're getting closer to that point, but it seems to me that with Theresa May running down the clock that we need to make an assessment of whether these potential –

AM: So you have to move quite quickly. There will be these votes this week, and I ask again, do you think the Labour Party will finally come out for another referendum this week?

TW: We're heading in that direction, but there's still more play in the days ahead.

AM: Okay. In that video statement you gave earlier in the week you also talked about changing the policies of the Labour Party. You said that you yourself were going to be looking at new social democratic policies for the Labour Party. First of all, what kind of policies were you talking about?

TW: Well, firstly let me just say the reason I said that is a political party is an amalgam of different ideas and traditions. And in trying to understand why Luciana and her colleagues have left the party one of the conclusions I've made is that the pluralism within a party, the different traditions represented on our front bench, for very understandable circumstances, such as the attempt to remove Jeremy two years ago, that is no longer working. And so if that social democratic tradition is not represented on our front bench, I think the only way we hold our party together is for us, for me to convene a group of MPs that believe in that tradition, that can develop their own policy recommendations –

AM: This sounds like a group inside the Labour Party. You don't believe, do you, that Jeremy Corbyn's a social democratic leader of the Labour Party?

TW: Well, I believe he represents a different tradition. But the Labour Party, it's the broadest of all churches, and we're only electorally successful if those different traditions can rub up against each other. I mean, Harold Wilson had Tony Benn and Roy Jenkins in his Cabinet. And so that is our challenge. And for me, if I some of the greatest talents we've got on the backbenches cannot be on the front bench for whatever reason, I do think the expression of their ideas needs to be given some greater weight in the Parliamentary Labour Party. Because the need is there.

AM: Do you think a reshuffle would get a different kind of front bench?

TW: I would prefer a reshuffle, but if there isn't one, I think I'd need to give a platform for my colleagues who want their ideas to be listened to by the current Shadow Cabinet. And I'm doing that, because that's the only –

AM: Some kind of council for social democracy inside the Labour Party?

TW: It hasn't got form yet, because I'm reacting to events like everyone else and I didn't know that colleagues were going to break away last Monday. So give me a bit of time. But my central point is that social democratic voice has to be heard, because that is the only way will you keep the Labour Party unified and prohibit other colleagues from potentially leaving the PLP. The situation is serious and that's why I'm sort of publicly intervening now, because I want to have my party together.

AM: And putting words into your mouth – and you can stop me – but it seems to me that what you're saying is that in order to stop other people leaving there has to be some kind of new grouping

or vehicle inside the Labour Party for people who have views more or less like yours?

TW: I'm saying for us to hold this party together, things have got to change. Now, this is sort of – there's almost a sort of crisis for the soul of the Labour Party now, and that means that everyone that cares about our future, whatever tradition they represent, has to find it within themselves to work more closely together. And that's as big a challenge for Jeremy as it is for me. But it's one that we've got to take for the Labour Party to be unified.

AM: You talked in the video about the hard left. What did you mean by that?

TW: Well, what I meant by that was some of the harsh excesses of some of the sort of hard left groups. You see, the problem is they've always been very small numbers but they can do irreparable harm. A small number of people in Liverpool Wavertree have made a very bright, young Labour Party Member of Parliament feel that she needs to leave. She felt unwelcome in her party. And of course their voices are amplified on social media and they organise in order to sort of almost pounce on MPs. So the harshness needs to go away, and one of the things I'm also going to recommend is that we start dealing with Labour Party members on social media who, I think, are bringing the party into disrepute.

AM: The bullying that you talked about.

TW: The bullying. It's unacceptable.

AM: You've been very clear what needs to change in terms of anti-Semitism, you've got new policies you want to discuss with colleagues in the party. We've talked about Europe. Will you be on the next big people's vote march yourself?

TW: Well, I might well be, Andrew. If Theresa May can't find it within herself to meet our red lines, closer economic union, then obviously our conference policy says that the next stage would be

in favour of a people's vote. So if we get to that point, then yes, I will be on the march.

AM: It does sound to me like you are raising a rebel flag inside the Jeremy Corbyn Labour Party.

TW: I'm not raising a rebel flag. I'm standing up for pluralism within our ranks, because that's the only way we're going to hold our consensus together. And be in no doubt, the situation is perilous for our party and we need to act and we need to act very quickly.

AM: Can I ask you what happens if there are no changes, if Jeremy Corbyn simply says no to the things that you're asking for? What happens to Tom Watson then?

TW: I absolutely fear that we will lose more parliamentary colleagues. We may lose peers from the House of Lords, and we may lose members and councillors. I don't want that to happen.

AM: And you may lose Tom Watson as well?

TW: No.

AM: Under no circumstances?

TW: I've been in the Labour Party since I was 15 years old. I was born into the Labour Party. For me, you know, you'd have to drive me out.

AM: Chuka Umunna said he'd die in the Labour Party, and look at him now.

TW: Well, you know, I'm not Chuka Umunna. I'm Tommy Watson from Kidderminster. I joined the Labour Party on my 15th birthday. I love this institution. 200,000 people elected me as Deputy Leader. But I want to hold it together. I need people to find unity within my party, and that means they've all got to change.

AM: And does Tommy Watson from Kidderminster regard himself as a loyal Deputy Leader to Jeremy Corbyn?

TW: I want Jeremy Corbyn to be the most successful prime minister we've seen. But that requires change, and what I've tried to do consistently for the last two years is hold everyone together. Now, clearly we've failed in that as a leadership team, which is why we need to respond to it and understand at a very deep level why people are feeling that they have to disengage from us.

AM: Part of the reason I'm pressing you is that clearly Jeremy Corbyn so far doesn't agree. He said about the bullying comment, he said, 'of course I disagree with Tom Watson. To tell you the truth, I don't believe it exists,' – that's bullying – 'exists on a wide scale. I will be speaking to Tom Watson in the very near future to talk about that.' It sounds like there is no meeting of minds.

TW: Well, actually the question put to him was a statement that was inaccurate regarding to me. But I will be talking to Jeremy about my concerns about this. In fact, today I've sent him a file of 50 members that have made anti-Semitic comments that in my view has not been dealt with adequately. And I know that he will look at them and share my horror that the party machinery has not dealt with them fully.

AM: Politics is a rough business. If I was Jeremy Corbyn watching this interview and watching the video that you put out this week, I would say to myself Tom Watson is not the kind of loyal, dependable deputy that I deserve.

TW: Well, that's why you're not leader of the Labour Party and Jeremy is. Because I think what Jeremy will be doing is saying I'm doing my very utmost to hold a party together in very difficult circumstances. When the centre ground has just been occupied by a new political entity, where they've just said they'll be a political party created that will be a rival for the Labour vote at the next general election. If he's to be prime minister this party has to be united, and that requires all of us to give a little.

AM: Do you really think he's going through a long dark night of the soul and is considering changing his politics in any radical way?

TW: Well, leadership requires you to change when the circumstances change, and I'm sure that that's what he's doing right now.

(ends)