ANDREW MARR SHOW, 24th February, 2019

HEIDI ALLEN AND LUCIANA BERGER
The Independent Group

AM: I’m joined by Heidi Allen, a former Tory MP, and Luciana Berger who left the Labour Party this week. Welcome to you both. There is a very obvious point which has been made by lots of members of the public that you are both in favour of a referendum, another referendum on Brexit. But when it comes to yourselves you won’t put yourselves up for re-election even though your circumstances have changed too and for a lot of people that just seems hypocritical.

LB: Well, I’ve listened to the response that I’ve had from my constituents over the past six days which has been overwhelmingly positive. I’ve never held back from being very clear what my positions are on a multitude of things. I stood on that platform at that last General Election. Actually I think the Labour Party has betrayed its promise to the British people to do everything possible to protect their jobs, and going forward it’s absolutely critical that at this junction where we are 33 days away from Brexit, 24 working days away from Brexit that we should be doing everything possible to be contending with that crisis situation that our country faces at this moment in time.

AM: But you’ve had local members knocking on doors, putting envelopes through letterboxes and so on week after week after week who feel let down by you. Isn’t the truth that if there was a by-election people of Liverpool Wavertree would choose a proper Labour MP, not you?

LB: I can only reflect on the response that I’ve had over this past six days and the multitude of calls that I’ve had, emails, the
response from my constituents – the response from the country that – and again I didn’t hold back previously, I was one of the first people to call for a General Election and I got vilified for it at the time before Christmas. Again, we are now a few months down the line with Brexit- a cliff edge that we are facing and we have a responsibility to contend with that issue.

AM: Heidi, in a sense you’re in an even worse position.

HA: Am I? Good.

AM: Well because you told your constituents back in 2017, ‘if I’m re-elected as your MP,’ as you were, ‘I am not going to waste precious time resisting Brexit from happening. I think a second referendum is not what we should be aiming for. The minute we start ignoring the democratic will of the people we are slipping towards a kind of banana republic.’ And now here you are doing all of those things you said you wouldn’t do?

HA: Because, even Amber Rudd in Cabinet I think said recently as politicians we have to deal with the facts that are in front of us right now. It’s no good making decisions based on something that was the circumstances a year ago. We were all behind the Prime Minister urging her to carve out a good deal that will protect our economy. Now for a multitude of reasons she’s failed to do that. So yes none of us have ever stopped, wanted to thwart Brexit but the whole point of a people’s vote is saying that the burden of this cannot be resolved by parliament; therefore the most democratic thing to do is to put it back to the British people. None of us crave it, but it’s a reality that will be the only option we have because parliament at this rate is unable to coalesce around a different way forward.
LB: And also it’s what the public wants. I mean I can only reflect on again the wants and wishes of my constituents, that’s what we’re here to do.

AM: Well thinking about constituents, are you a big fan of George Osborne?

LB: Well we are not going to agree on everything. We come from different political traditions. We come from different generations, we come from different parts of the country but what binds us together is our values and our commitment to doing something different on behalf of the constituents.

AM: But you are now sitting alongside and bound together with Anna Soubry who said: ‘I personally think George did a great job. I’m a big fan of George Osborne’s; the coalition government did a marvellous job.’ How can you sit alongside with somebody who thinks that about austerity?

LB: Well I also listened to Anna when she was on television on Friday talking about the challenges in her local area that have been so affected by, not just what’s in the pot, but how that money is being distributed and the biggest issue, and I see it in my own area in Liverpool while we’re facing so many challenges is because the weightings of deprivation were taken out of the funding formulas, and so in areas like Liverpool we’ve seen a 64% cut to our local authority’s budgets. So again there’s one-off decisions that take place at various moments. As I said there are going to be things that we disagree on and that’s part of what we’re seeking to do going forward is that we’re going to operate in an adult way which is beyond party lines, which is sticking to reach a consensus.
AM: Members of the public do need to know what you stand for and we’ll come to that in just a second. Before we do, we were talking about welfare cuts Heidi Allen, you said that you were very upset about the way that the Conservatives have treated people at the bottom of the economic pile. But you also in 2015 stood on a manifesto for a party which has already accomplished £18 billion of welfare cuts and was promising another £12 billion. So to your voters at the election you were saying yes to welfare cuts and now you’re saying they’re terrible.

HA: As Luciana was getting onto I think it’s also, it’s not just - at a moment in time yes we were in a dreadful position with regarding the debt and the deficit and decisions had to be made, but it’s how you – how a government reviews its policies as it moves forward. Clearly with inflation and so many other factors, now we have a risk of Brexit no deal on the horizon, a government has to constantly review and check what its policies were. And it’s the way that Universal Credit from my point of view has been rolled out. It’s not just about the money in it.

AM: By the way it was done?

HA: Yes, absolutely. It could be the most phenomenal benefit system out there but at the moment it’s treating people not like human beings, just like a sausage machine.

AM: Lots of folk at home are going to be scratching their heads and thinking, okay, what does this new group actually stand for? So I’m going to do some quick fire questions if you don’t mind. Heidi Allen, renationalising water and the railways, yes or no?

HA: My gut instinct is no, but like all of these things it needs to be built on evidence and actually rather than just choosing ideological
solutions what will work and what can be learned from other countries.

LB: Before you carry on I mean I’d just say that we are six days in and we’ve taken –

AM: I understand that.

LB: - the step to leave our parties, but we haven’t even had our inaugural meeting which we are really looking forward to.

HA: Tomorrow.

LB: Which is tomorrow and actually for all of these policy decisions the idea that you’re asking me through the prism of the old politics and what we’re seeking to do is actually do this in a very, very different way. We’re going to listen to the country.

AM: I’m trying not to be silly but I also think an awful lot of people thinking about this new group, you’ve been in the news all week, are wondering what kind of things you’d stand for. So in that spirit. Not being definitive about it.

LB: No, no sure but I’d people to what binds us together which is - with the platform that we’ve come together on at the moment is our values. And we’ve got a website called The Independent.group which people can look at.

AM: Is the abolition of tuition fees affordable? Abolition of tuition fees, affordable or not affordable?

LB: Well I think we have to look at the – it must be on an individual personal level, we have to look at the whole education range and for me the greatest thing we need to focus on is the
early years and we’re going to give every child in this country the best start in life. It starts with the first one thousand and one days and that’s not being addressed.

AM: One final one –

HA: This is like Mr and Mrs.

AM: Top rate of tax, up to 50p for the richest people in the country, yes or no?

HA: Doesn’t feel right to me but again let’s base it in evidence. Because this is the wild and crazy idea. Rather than just because Tories always low tax, Labour always high tax, we want to change that completely. We want a bit – like you do in business – coalesce around the evidence and battle a policy out until we actually know that we think this is going to work for our country right here and now and for the future. It isn’t about decrying policies that any of us had in the past. This is starting again with something completely new and a very different approach to politics.

AM: Nothing ever starts again immediately. So if there’s another Vote of Confidence in Theresa May as Prime Minister, how would you vote?

HA: I would do nothing at all that would precipitate a General Election or give any more instability to the country.

AM: So you’d probably back her in fact?

HA: If that were the alternative, yes.
AM: Now a lot of people would say Luciana Berger, that what you have done makes a Tory government next time more likely. Do you accept that?

LB: Well I mean there are so many different polls that have just come out over the course of this weekend that point to lots of different things depending on who’s the Leader of which party. Again that’s not a reason not to do and make the decision, and a very very difficult decision that I am and my colleagues have taken this week. Ultimately I’ve left my party but I’ve left my party for in my view very, very good reasons, but it’s about the future, it’s about trying to do something better and different. I could have carried done nothing at all with the status quo, put my fingers in my ears and pretended like there wasn’t a problem. There is a problem and I think my constituents in the country deserve better than that.

AM: Can I ask you both, is this going to be a political party? We still don’t really know that yet.

HA: Yes, that’s the hope, absolutely.

AM: So it is going to be a political party that will stand up and down the country? People will be able to vote for you all over Britain?

LB: That’s the intention, but again you know looking at this through the paradigm of the 20th century and actually we think we’ve got a responsibility to reflect on the response for what people think and feel which has been very, very positive. And also to do this in a measured way. It’s not about just clicking our fingers and switching on a party which you know happened in the past.
HA: And the more we rush the more likely it is that we won’t last the long haul because we have to get the infrastructure right. Our policies, our values and build from there.

AM; And a leader as well. You’ve said in the past that you think Chuka Umunna is the likeliest leader of the new party, do you agree with that Luciana Berger?

LB: Well isn’t it great that there’s so much talent with our group that people are already talking about what should happen.

AM: That is an old 20th century answer.

LB: Well no not at all and actually if you look at our values that we’ve actually shared on our website we’ve talked about that we all have a duty to lead and we all have a responsibility, and part of the challenge at the moment with our politics and with parliament is that we’ve got too many people – we’ve got colleagues saying things to us privately before this week that affirmed the decision that we’ve made and what we’re doing and that politics is broken but are not prepared at this moment in time to do the same. So we’ve made that difficult step, it hasn’t been an easy one but I feel it’s the right one for the country.

AM: You have other challenges shortly ahead, do you rule yourself out as being leader of this new party?

LB: We’re not a party yet. We haven’t even had our inaugural meeting so that will take place tomorrow. I’m really looking forward to it, I think the fact that we’ve got some standing orders and we’re looking to establish those values and principles going forward, that’s really very exciting, but we are on a journey and we’re at the start of that journey at this moment in time.
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AM: You must be aware of how much upset and anger what you've done has caused your old colleagues in the Labour Party. I just want you to look at what Emily Thornberry said about you yesterday at a meeting with Jeremy Corbyn.

Emily Thornberry
And they now have the cheek, the cheek to reject our new manifesto, our new activists and our new leader and when it was our manifesto and our activists and our leader they gave them a huge majority that they now have in their seats today. Those seats that they have betrayed by their actions.

HI: I can't imagine why you're leaving, Luciana.

AM: What do you make about that? Part of what she says is right. You did stand on a Corbyn manifesto, you did very well on that manifesto and you were helped into power, or helped into parliament by people who are remaining inside the Labour Party who support Jeremy Corbyn.

LB: Well my values haven’t changed and in terms of the platform that I stood on when I first ran in 2010 and again in 2015 I am the same person and in my view it’s my party that’s changed and there’s already evidence of where the Labour Party has betrayed the British public in terms of the commitments it’s made and what it’s now saying and doing when it comes to Brexit. I think the public watching that and many other speeches that have been made over the course of the weekend, comments made by the Shadow Foreign Secretary that we should be crushed, is every reason why I’ve made the right decision and actually that’s the culture of a politics that I’m leaving behind and again I think that we should be operating in an open way, in a tolerant way that that is what in the 21st century the country only deserves.
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