ANDREW MARR SHOW
BARONESS CHAKRABARTI
SHADOW ATTORNEY GENERAL

AM: Now we could have a very, very boring interview in which I said it’s all Jeremy Corbyn’s fault, he’s got to go and you said no it’s not, and we just go round and round and round in circle.
C: So we won’t do that.
AM: - and everybody else wanders off and has cups of coffee.
C: So we won’t do that.
AM: So let’s try not to do that. Let’s try and be serious about it.
How deep a hole do you think you’re in when you look at that Copeland result? What did you think?

Chakrabarti: Well I was in Copeland last weekend knocking on doors and I felt that Copeland is probably one of those constituencies that was neglected by my own party over some years. It’s remote from London, it’s changed its shape over many years. There’s the nuclear industry and people have done very well out of that industry and then the people left behind. And I think it just goes to show that you cannot weigh people’s votes you have to cherish them. And yes, we lost by two thousand but I believe that when people see what Mrs May’s hard Brexit looks like and when people see an alternative vision coming from a more united Labour Party as I believe we can be, they will change their minds.

AM: You see that sounds a little bit like what Jeremy Corbyn said when he said it was basically a revolt against the establishment. Which doesn’t really make sense –
C: it does though.
AM: Just wait a second – how can people if they’re rebelling against the establishment turn and vote for Theresa May, the Prime Minister and the Conservative Party?
C: Well, from my experience in Copeland, in Copeland Labour has looked like the establishment for a very long time because they’ve been represented by Labour for a long time. And so there are peculiarities about that seat, like you know what was said about our position on the nuclear industry that was apocryphal and so on, but I don’t want to just make it all about the specifics of Copeland. We’ve clearly got work to do. We’ve clearly suffered from disunity to leadership elections in the space of a year. We’ve clearly suffered from the fact that our supporters were divided, like the country over Brexit and that’s been such a big issue for some time. But now I think once Article 50 is triggered, as it will be, we have an opportunity to unite about things that really matter to people’s lives, like schools and hospitals and jobs and benefits. Like the terrible cuts to the disability benefits and so on.

AM: There is something strange happening here which is that on the NHS, on disability benefits and so forth you have messages which you think people really care about and are central to their lives and yet when Labour talks about it it does not cut through. There is something going wrong between the Labour Party on the one hand and the country on the other.

C: Well I think on cutting through we have suffered, as I say, from disunity. If we’re always talking about the leadership and fighting with each other over the leadership that won’t help us cut through. I think sometimes we haven’t had the fairest almost balanced treatment in the media, including in the broadcast media.

AM: As you know the Left has always said it’s the media.

C: No, no it’s not the media.
AM: For hundreds of years.
C: No, but I’m not blaming the media. I’m just saying that the disunity has been the focus – I mean even on your programme
last week, a few days before a by election in two Brexit seats there wasn’t a single person on your programme speaking for the leadership.

AM: There was a well-represented Labour MP in the paper review who was –
C: And you had Lord Mandelson.
AM: Yeah, we’re allowed to have Lord Mandelson, aren’t we?

C: You’re allowed to have whoever you like but it wasn’t, if I may say so you know the fairest balance a few days before a by election in two Labour Brexit seats.

AM: Well, except that Lord Mandelson and Tony Blair, who’s also criticised for this, under that terrible regime Labour won Copeland by massive majorities time and time again and the same with Stoke.

C: It’s not about the terrible regime. It’s about the fact that representatives cannot weigh people’s votes anymore and my experience from talking to people in Copeland is that they felt that they were neglected for too long.

AM: They were taken for granted by the Labour Party and they were going to kick back?

C: For too long and that is not going to happen. And Jack Dromey is right when he says that part of what worked for Labour in Stoke was listening to people and listening to their concerns that are not about Jeremy Corbyn but about the fact for example in Stoke that people want social housing. About the fact for example that in Copeland people don’t have adequate roads and now their hospital is under threat.
AM: Okay, so we agree that something has to change. Let me read you Dave Prentis, a very important figure in the Labour movement of course, the UNISON General Secretary who said: “Stoke should never have been doubt. To lose Copeland held by Labour for 83 years to a party that has inflicted seven years of painful spending cuts on our country and is damaging the NHS is disastrous. Last autumn I said Labour had never been further from government in my lifetime. Five months on the party still hasn’t move an inch closer to Downing Street. Copeland is indicative of a party sliding towards irrelevance.” And that if I may say so is on your watch and Jeremy Corbyn’s watch.

C: Well what I would say to Dave Prentis and some of these other “great men” of the Left, is that it’s time to unite because constant attacks on the leadership, constant leadership elections, constant divisions don’t actually attack the issues that would allow us to present an alternative vision of what this country should be.

AM: Shami Chakrabarti, he wasn’t attacking the leadership there, he was describing is happening. He was describing reality. There are some people who say that you are all frankly distanced from reality, that you are hiding from what’s really going on.

C: I don’t – well I don’t accept that. I’ve just talked to you for some minutes about what I think has been happening in places like Copeland. I think people have felt neglected and left behind by their representative including Labour representatives for too long and I think whether it’s Jack Dromey or whether it’s - or whether it’s Jeremy Corbyn I think that the party is in listening mode, but it won’t be able to put that listening into practice unless it unites.

AM: We’ve seen a whole series of excuses about Copeland
C: It’s not an excuse.
AM: Well you yourself said, “I think we have suffered from Storm Doris because traditionally it’s Labour voters who don’t have cars and find it harder in bad weather.”

C: Well that is one aspect of all by elections when you have low turn –

AM: We’ve had rain, we’ve had wind in by elections for hundreds of years and somehow voters for the opposition parties have managed to come out and defeat the government party for hundreds of years.

C: There was a low turnout in Copeland having been to Copeland recently I know that it’s a very rural constituency, you know public transport is not great. But it’s just one factor. Of course that’s not the entire explanation.

AM: Okay, well let’s look a little bit at Stoke where you did much better in the sense that you pushed back UKIP and you defeated UKIP. However, one of the kind of key claims of the Corbyn movement has been by –

C: The Corbyn movement?

AM: Well, Corbynites. Pro Corbyn people as it were. I’m not even saying Momentum, but that wing of the party has been that by growing the party membership so hugely you’ve put Labour into a new position. You’re one of the biggest parties now in western Europe. Huge party membership. But what doesn’t seem to happen is you don’t seem to be able to translate that into getting more voters actually out. So you get big membership but fewer voters.

C: Well what I would say about activating the membership is that in Stoke hundreds and hundreds of members from around the
country went to Stoke and I’m sure that that was of help to the team there in getting the vote out. Copeland, a bit more remote. We had fewer people on the ground but I do still think that having a mass membership can be translated. Even if people recruit or persuade colleagues and family members that is part of changing politics.

AM: They have to do something different though, don’t they, because in Stoke which had I think more non voters than any constituency in the General Election just past, again the actual number of people voting Labour went down, you know, that big, big party membership did not translate into getting non party members into the ballot boxes.

C: I think you’re right and I think the reasons are party we suffered from disunity. We suffered from being split over Brexit. Our supporters and our constituencies like the country are split, but now that we’ve moved beyond that very divisive issue the questions for this country are about what kind of a place it’s going to be. Is it going to be a place where people with dementia don’t get the benefits that the tribunal say they can get because the Conservatives are not a party for working people but for the super rich.

AM: So when it comes to explaining what happened and looking forward, Tom Watson said the whole leadership presumably including you, you have to take a long hard look in the mirror and think about what’s going to happen. If it’s not the people, if it’s not Jeremy Corbyn and Shami Chakrabarti and whoever to blame, then it must be the policies. There’s nothing else it can be. So where do you see the Labour Party changing its policy positions to show that it’s listening to people?

C: I think it’s not just about policy, sometimes it’s about communication and sometimes it is about getting the space and
making the space to be heard. We’ve got some wonderful Shadow Cabinet colleagues who I rarely see get the airtime they deserve. Debbie Abrahams is a wonderful Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, Angela Rayner on Education, Rebecca Long-Bailey on Business. A lot of the women actually because it’s now a very female Shadow Cabinet and it would be nice sometimes to hear those voices heard, including on your programme.

AM: Well we have them on time to time. Everyone on from time to time.
C: No doubt more in the future.

AM: I’m sure we will. Just before we leave this however, one of the other things is the suggestion that the Labour Party in London, the Metropolitan Labour Party, the metropolitan elite are out of touch on kind of cultural and security issues from Labour voters and you saw the story in the Mail on Sunday today about mobile phones.

C: No, thank you.
AM: Can I ask you directly, did you say that?
C: No.
AM: You didn’t.
C: And what I will say is even the Mail on Sunday in that piece talks about alleged, alleged, alleged, alleged which is not something that you did in your crunchy hard facts paper review, so I can say that that is an apocryphal story. Not nice to talk about - I’ll tell you what, mobile phones are not just a problem in prison, they’re clearly a problem in malicious hands in the Palace of Westminster as well.

AM: Very good. And you never wanted mobile phones to stay in the hands of the thing. The other thing that you’ve been attacked for in the press recently and since you’re here I’d better ask you about it is being jubilant and enthusiastic when Mr Fiddler was
released from Guantanamo Bay. He then went on of course, he changed his name and blew himself up we’re told working for ISIS in Syria. How did you feel about that?

C: I campaigned for the closure of Guantanamo and short of that I campaigned for Britons to be returned from Guantanamo and I did that alongside for example the Mail on Sunday. That was my position, that remains my position. That’s nothing about being jubilant about individuals. One of the things about internment as a policy is you have no idea whether individuals concerned are guilty or innocent and my belief remains that interning people without charge or trial and torturing them is a recruiting sergeant for terrorism. It is not a way of preventing it.

AM: Even though in this case somebody who was clearly dangerous was let out?

C: Well, what I would say is if you aren’t dangerous before you get interned and mistreated you’re more likely to be dangerous afterwards. It was a bad policy in Northern Ireland and it remains a really bad policy in Guantanamo Bay.

AM: All right. Final question on the by election results. I’ve talked to a lot of people inside the Labour Party on the left, the centre and the right, across the party and there’s a lot of real anxiety and fear about where the Labour Party is going and they say again and again, you hear the phrase again and again, and the leadership is in denial.

C: Well I try to speak about the – you know the real issues going back a long time. I don’t consider myself to be in denial. But I think some of the people you’re talking to need to take their share of the collective responsibility as well. If we unite as a party, if we concentrate on going forward, on what we should be, which is a party that goes back to its roots, a party of equality, a party for
the NHS and schools and hospitals and disability benefits for ordinary people I think we'll do very much better.

AM: And just in case Rebecca Long-Bailey is watching this programme, you know she has been invited on the programme and so far has been unable to come, but I'm sure she will be able to do in the future.

C: I will do. I will pass that on.

ENDS