ANDREW MARR SHOW
HILARY BENN

AM: Hilary Benn has long been a quiet critic of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership but this morning it does look as if a full scale coup against the Labour leader is underway. Mr Benn was sacked overnight for disloyalty and he joins me now.

AM: Good morning Mr. Benn, it’s been a short night for you, I apologise.

AM: Just talk us through first of all actually what happened in the small hours of the night.

HB: Well can I say first of all that this has been a very difficult decision for me because I agreed to serve in Jeremy Corbyn’s Shadow Cabinet, I didn’t vote for him but I thought we had a responsibility to support him as the elected Leader of the Labour Party, as I’ve supported every Labour Leader since I was elected as a Member of Parliament. But it has become increasingly clear that there is growing concern in the Shadow Cabinet, in the Parliamentary Labour Party about his leadership and I said to him that I no longer had confidence in –

AM: Did you call him first?

HB: I no longer had confidence in his leadership and he then dismissed me from the Shadow Cabinet which is understandable and I thanked him for having given me the opportunity to serve as Shadow Foreign Secretary. But the position is this. At this absolutely critical time for our country, following the EU referendum result, the Labour Party needs strong and effective leadership to hold the government to account as we take decisions of huge importance for the future of our country. We don’t currently have that and there is also no confidence that we will be able to win a General Election as long as Jeremy remains Leader. And I felt it was important to say that.
AM: Is there a general concerted move now against him? We’ve seen Heidi Alexander announcing her resignation this morning and there are rumours of others to follow. You have been talking to a lot of these people, are we going to see more resignations do you think?

HB: Well of course members of the Shadow Cabinet, as you would expect, certainly in the wake of the referendum result have been talking to each other. It is for each individual to make their own decision. I have made mine and I made my views clear to Jeremy. He’s a good and decent man –

AM: So was it hard for you?
HB: He’s a good and decent man but he is not a leader, and that is the problem.

AM: You called him presumably.
HB: I did.
AM: When you called him did you know that he was therefore going to have to fire you? You can’t call your leader and say I don’t have confidence in you and then be told you can carry on, so you knew what was going to happen.

HB: Well I wasn’t entirely surprised, but of course it was important that I had that conversation with him and he took his decision, as he’s perfectly entitled to do.

AM: Do you accept that what you did was disloyal?

HB: Well I said what I believed to be true and I think in life and in politics it’s extremely important and I’ve been a member of the Labour Party for 45 years. Like lots of people I’ve devoted my political and a lot of my personal life to it, and if things are not working then I think we have a wider responsibility to the party
that we love to speak out because although this is – a number of people will say this is not an ideal time, there’s never an ideal time, but it isn’t working and therefore I felt it was important to speak out.

AM: Let’s talk a little bit about the timing then. It was less than a year ago that Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader on an absolutely massive landslide vote inside the Labour Party by ordinary Labour members, trade unionists and others, and now it appears that is a coup against him by Parliamentarians who are much much smaller in number than that and that this is happening at a time of national crisis when the Conservative Party, many people will say, are tearing themselves apart and an election looms quite quickly. Isn’t this the worst possible timing to be doing this?

HB: Well look, I wanted Jeremy to be able to succeed. That’s why I agreed to serve in the Shadow Cabinet. Now not everybody who had previously been in positions of responsibility agreed to do so, but it has become clear that he is not succeeding and there is never an ideal time and I recognise that and I also understand there will be those in the party who are very, very unhappy about this, but we owe a wider duty to the party and I think the country needs a strong and effective Labour opposition, Andrew.

AM: Can you walk us through the next few days, whether or not we get more resignations today there is then a meeting of the Parliamentary party on Monday and I think the possibility of a secret ballot on Tuesday on a Motion of No Confidence which Ann Coffey and Margaret Hodge laid down. Is that the moment at which you think he may have to go?

HB: Well ultimately it’s for Jeremy to make his own decision and for other members of the Shadow Cabinet, the front bench, to decide what it is they’re going to do. There’s obviously a number of things happening which you have just described, but what we
need more than anything else is strong leadership to deal with the challenge that the country faces, because the decisions you’ve just been discussing with Sajid Javid on Article 50 I think personally on that I think we need to work out what kind of a relationship we want to have with Europe. I think it’s very important that we continue to have access to the single market. It’s clear that in the referendum the majority sent us a message about free movement and we have to accept the decision of the referendum although I am very sorry about the outcome.

AM: Is there any possibility of the Labour Party at an election, as the Liberal Democrats now seem to be doing to say look, we are standing at this election on the basis that we think the decision to leave the EU was a catastrophe and we are not going to implement it or we’re going to do as much as we can to frustrate that decision if we are elected?

HB: I think we have to respect the democratic decision and the democratic will of the British people, however much – AM: I’m glad you said that.
HB: No, I think it’s really important – however much we may disagree with that, however sad we may be about the outcome.

AM: So it is over. It is finished.
HB: The decision has been taken, we have to make the best of it. We have to heal the wounds that have been created by the campaign and bring the nation together, because a nation that is divided on such a fundamental issue that is not good for the future of our country.

AM: Have you decided yourself whether to stand as Leader of the Labour Party?

HB: I am not going to be a candidate for Leader of the Labour Party and I haven’t taken the decision that I did because I want
to. I took this decision because I thought it was the right thing to do because I care, as do all of us about the future of the party we’ve committed so much of our lives to.

AM: In some respects this seems like a future coup attempt, because whatever the Parliamentary party decides to do this week, even if they decide overwhelmingly they don’t have confidence in their leader, that decision then has to go back to the mass membership of the Party, who as we know from the polls and the movements and so forth, are still vehemently enthusiastically in favour of Jeremy Corbyn. So whatever happens in parliament the Labour Party’s going to choose Jeremy Corbyn again – isn’t it?

HB: Well, it depends what happens. It depends whether Jeremy chooses to step down or whether he chooses to fight again. But I would also say to you, Andrew, from conversations on the doorstep and also conversations with the Labour Party members, that there are people who voted for Jeremy last year who are now saying it’s not working, is it? And the party will have to reflect on that, because in the end we have to decide are we going to be an effective political force that is capable of winning support? We have to win support from people who didn’t vote for us in 2015. There’s the poll in the paper today which suggests that just under a third of the people who voted for us in 2015 are saying at the moment they wouldn’t do so now if there were a General Election and that is – that would be catastrophic for the party as well as for the country because we need a strong and effective Labour Party.

AM: I’m just guessing and looking what happened in this referendum campaign a lot of those people are going to go to UKIP.

HB: Well, that remains to be seen, and we have to show as a party that we have listened to the message, that the majority, the
52% have sent us, I think there are a number of reasons for that to do with the EU and sovereignty. Immigration clearly was a big issue on the doorstep but also communities that have seen profound change, insecurity, the old jobs disappeared, people worrying about the future, housing for their children. Now these are the great challenges that we face as a nation and the Labour Party has got to be listening and then show that we have understood and that we will come forward with policies that will help to deal with all of those things.

AM: All that being the case, do you think Jeremy Corbyn should now resign as Labour Leader?

HB: Well I no longer have confidence in him and I think the right thing for him to do would be to take that decision, but that is a matter for him, just as the decision I have taken has been a matter for me.

AM: Do you have a candidate in mind who might replace him?

HB: No, I don’t. This is not about that.

AM: In a sense it’s about who becomes your leader, that’s kind of important.

HB: Well of course, but if there is a leadership election that will be a decision for Labour Party members and each of us will have a vote. It’s not about this, it’s about telling the truth that is increasingly widely felt that the leadership that we currently have is not working and in those circumstances we would not be doing our job if we didn’t say that openly and honestly and that is what I’ve done.
AM: if he is trounced in this vote of no confidence next week, if it happens next week, we’re still not absolutely sure, at that point do you think it’s over for him?

HB: Well I think it’s very difficult for the leader of any political party to survive a vote of no confidence of the members of parliament that he is leading, but we’ll have to see what happens.

AM: We’re in a very, very unstable position where you could have the leader not supported by many of his own MPs, but supported by the party and the country. Wouldn’t you need some kind of new structure in the Labour Party to deal with that?

HB: Well I don’t think that’s an issue to talk about today. The fact is we have to deal with the situation that we find ourselves in. We had the referendum campaign. Now I don’t blame Jeremy for the outcome of the referendum, but I think people saw that he didn’t bring a great deal of enthusiasm to the task of arguing the case for Britain remaining in the European Union.

AM: Some people on the other side of this argument, on the Corbyn side of the argument say that you are leading a coup against him. Is that a fair way of putting it?

HB: Well I wouldn’t describe it as that myself.

AM: How would you describe it?

HB: Well I would say I’ve come to the conclusion, Andrew, that I no longer have confidence and you have to be honest about that and therefore I was saying to him I couldn’t continue to serve and he dismissed me and that is absolutely his right. And as I said earlier it’s not surprising that he did so. And it’s for others to take their own decision. But if this is the conclusion that you reach about a party that we care so much about, then I think the right
thing to do is to be straight forward and open about it and consequences will unfold. ENDS