AM: I’m joined by Labour’s Shadow Health Secretary, Jonathan Ashworth. He’s announcing five key tests this morning for the NHS. Which is the most important one, Jonathan?

JA: Well they’re all important, that’s why they’re key tests.

AM: Yeah, but there’s five of them as well. We’ve only got limited time.

JA: I appreciate that, Andrew. I think there’s a number of fundamentals that need to be tackled to safeguard the NHS for the future. Funding is clearly one of them. I mean the NHS has gone through this huge financial squeeze and cut backs.

AM: Well let’s stick on funding then, if we can. You must be delighted about these stories coming out, that the Tories are going to increase real term spending on the NHS by something like 4% a year.

JA: Well, we’ll see where we actually get to, because it looks like Philip Hammond is pushing back on that. I mean we’ve been calling for more money for the NHS. Last year at the General Election we’d have allocated an extra £45 billion to the NHS and social care across a parliament and when the NHS has been going through this massive financial squeeze, when it’s cutting – you know 16,000 beds have been lost in the NHS over the last eight years. It needs more investment. But there’s other things that need to be done as well.

AM: Well before we come onto those, let’s, as I say, stick on the investment. We could have a very predictable conservation you
and me where you say things have been terrible under the Tories and I say yes, but what you do? And we go round and round in circles. Let me just stick on the money side, because this 4% is being hard briefed at the moment. Now we’ll see what happens but that is considerably more than the 2% that you were offering at the last election not that long ago. According to the IFS it would be 2% real increase a year under Labour, 4% under the Tories. They’re overtaking you but rather dangerously, not on the right, on the left.

JA: Well in cash terms the NHS and the social care sector would be getting an extra £8 billion this year if we’d have been in government, which would be a substantial increase. We’ll see where the government get to now. We were prepared to put up taxation to fund those NHS and social care spending commitments.

AM: And it looks like they’re going to do the same.
JA: Well are they? Because I’m not so sure. Because I’m not sure if Theresa May commands the confidence or indeed the respect of her backbenchers to get taxation changes through parliament. So if it’s not going to be taxation is it going to cuts elsewhere in public expenditure? The IFS said –
AM: Or as you would advocate, borrowing.
JA: No, no, we said we’d put up taxation for the top 5% of earners to fund our increase in NHS expenditure. Is she government going to put up taxation? Is it going to expand borrowing? Or, a defence sector, the education sector, the police sector going to be cut back to fund its NHS commitments?

AM: Very simple question. When the Conservatives finally announce what they’re going to do, probably in early July, time of the 70th anniversary, will you match it or will you go beyond it?

JA: Well we will scrutinise it carefully because –
AM: So you’re not even prepared to say you’ll match the Tory’s spending on the NHS?
JA: Because we don’t know what they’re going to say yet. In 2015 they told us they were delivering an extra £10 billion for the NHS. When you scrutinise the figures it turns out it was nowhere near that, because they were cutting the public health budgets, they were cutting the training budgets, they were cutting the infrastructure budgets, so we’ll have to scrutinise if carefully.

AM: Do you accept that Labour needs to offer more for the NHS than it’s offering now?
JA: Well, we need to offer – which is what we are offering – a long term plan, because it’s not just about the –
AM: No, no, do you need to offer more money than you’re offering now?
JA: We’re offering a substantial amount of money, but we also –
AM: Do you need to offer more money than you’re offering now?
JA: We’re offering a substantial amount of money, £45 billion-
AM: That’s not an answer to my question.
JA: £45 billion extra, but we also need to look at the structures of the NHS.
AM: I don’t want to go all Emma Barnett but you’re not answering my question.
JA: You would never – you’re not going Emma Barnett at all.
AM: One more time, do you accept that the Labour Party needs to offer more for the NHS than it is currently offering?
JA: We’re offering substantial amounts of money now. When we come towards a General Election we will come out again with our revised spending plans for the NHS. And I am very aware that the NHS over the next 10 to 15, 20 years needs substantially more than what the current projections from the government are suggesting it will get. So as we get closer to a General Election we will give –
AM: Okay. You’re not promising any more money than you’re offering at the moment.
JA: Because well – I’m not the Shadow Chancellor, am I and I can’t write the Labour’s financial plans live on air.

AM: We both know whatever party’s in power there is a problem which is people want the NHS but they don’t want to pay more taxes for it, to put it brutally and perhaps unfairly.
JA: But we’re prepare to put a tax for the NHS. Are the Tories prepared to put up taxes?
AM: I know. So the question that’s being discussed on the Tory side, and I’ve asked you about before as well, is the possibility of an earmarked NHS. A so called hypothecated NHS tax. Are you against that?

JA: There’s two things. There’s a soft way of doing it. You put up a tax rise and you hypothecate the yield from that tax rise. That’s essentially what we’re saying. We’re prepared to put up taxation to fund the NHS. But a separate NHS tax which will peak and trough with the economic cycle is not a sustainable way to fund the NHS for the long term. But if I may, there is an important point about structure.

AM: You see you quite liked what Gordon Brown did when he earmarked an NI, a National Insurance rise for the NHS.
JA: Yes, yes I did like that.
AM: You liked that, so you could that?
JA: I did like that because he was hypothecating the yield from a National Insurance rise and he was prepared to put it. Tories voted against it of course and said the NHS was a Stalinist creation at the time. But he was prepared to put up tax to fund the NHS. We, the Labour Party are prepared to put up tax on the wealthiest of earners to fund the NHS. I’m not convinced the Tory party are. But I must make this point. As well as dealing with the funding, the structures are so fragmented –
AM: I’m glad you said that ’cause I want to go to the structures straight away.

JA: Excellent.

AM: Which is your Leader, Jeremy Corbyn has been absolutely crystal clear that the one thing that will not happen under a Labour government is private provision inside the NHS. Can I ask you at what point, after a Labour government takes power, the last private hip operation or the last private knee operation will take place in the NHS?

JA: Well there’s a distinction. The NHS’s long spot purchased from the private sector for a hip or a knee when there’s been a capacity issue in the NHS. And given at the moment that we’ve got rid of so many beds in the NHS, 16,000 beds, about 5,000 mental health beds, mental health services at the moment are increasingly buying beds for people in crisis from private providers. It’s not idea. I don’t like it.

AM: So you would keep private provision in order to keep waiting lists down? For instance.

JA: Well our aim is an expansion of public provision, but I’m not ideological. I’m not overnight going to tell the NHS you cannot keep purchasing from the private sector when you’ve got patients in need. But what I want is a fully funded –

AM: Well that’s very interesting.

JA: - public NHS so it doesn’t have to rely on the private sector. That’s the difference.

AM: Let me give you another example which is really important in the NHS at the moment, which is AI and technology, because an awful lot of people in the NHS think that the future is big data and that’s going to allow people to be treated much better in a few year’s time than they are today. The problem is all the big data companies, all the date companies are private companies. Would a
Labour government continue to allow the NHS to work closely with people like Google and other private companies?

JA: The NHS has always worked with private companies. The NHS doesn't build its own ambulances, does it and manufacture its own equipment? We've always bought from the private sector. And this is a really important point. There's huge technological advancements coming down the line from genomics, to AI and the internet of things, you know. Something like 45 trillion objects will be connected to the internet things in the next 20 years.

AM: So you're not going to expel the money changers from the Temple?
JA: You know, of course we're going to have a relationship and I want these innovations in technology to be in the NHS. But the problem with the NHS at the moment is that the structures are so fragmented, this sort of endless competition and tendering between different elements of the NHS, that it's all sort of broken up that it can't take best advantage of these great advancements. We need to move to a system of planning and partnership in the NHS and get rid of all the internal marketisation we've seen in recent years.

AM: Okay, Jonathan Ashworth, one final personal question.
JA: Oh my word!
AM: It's the music season, it's the festival season. Are you going to Labour Live? Go on.
JA: I may well go there. I may be doing a turn.
AM: You may. I think you may have to go. All right Jonathan Ashworth, thanks very much indeed.

Ends