MH: Good morning Mister Lewis. So local elections first of all, and as voters go to the polls on Thursday their council’s ability to deliver services will be at the forefront of their minds. Do you accept that Conservative policies, austerity, have caused pain and disruption to people’s lives?

BL: Well, I fully accept that from after 2010, because of the economic situation we inherited from Labour, we had to make some really tough decisions. Local government accounts for about a quarter of all public sector spend, and therefore had to bear its side of that.

MH: And that those decisions have caused pain and disruption?

BL: Well, actually what we see across the country, particularly with Conservative-led councils, is actually delivering more and for less. They’re cheaper in terms of council tax and they’ve been able to protect generally frontline services. But there have been tough decisions to make. But also because of the way we’ve managed the economy, actually this year we’re able to make 1.3 billion in real cash terms available to local authorities.

MH: Bus services outside London have been cut by 48 per cent. Libraries have been cut by 10 per cent. Do you think public libraries are important?

BL: I do actually. And Conservative councils around the country are not only managing to keep them open, some are opening libraries as well. But also I think sometimes we forget to look at local government finance in the round. People talk about the – what they call the RSG, the settlement grant that comes from central government. But actually it’s that wide a pool, that fact
that we’ve changed how they’re financed and they now keep business rates in a way that they never did before. So the overall money for local government –

MH: Bus services outside London are cut by nearly half. Just think about the effect that that has on the lives of people who depend on those services.

BL: But also, as I say, if we look at the overall picture, different local authorities do different things. Some have actually, instead of using buses have found more cost-effective ways of supplying transport using local taxi firms and things like that, which are more – in some rural areas can be more efficient. But also local government now has funding of over 200 billion a year, and this year, because of the changes we’ve been able to make, including retaining more of the business rates – as I say, they’ve got a real increase of about 1.3 billion pounds.

MH: You say that Conservative councils are managing things well and managing to deliver services even in this tough time, and yet when you hear from some of those Conservative leaders of councils there’s no doubt about how difficult they find all of this. Richard Cornelius, the Conservative leader of Barnet council in north London: ‘We are really, really short of money, there’s no money, it’s really difficult.’ Barry Lewis, the Conservative leader of Derbyshire County Council saying that some councils are at a cliff edge. These are your people, this is what they’re saying.

BL: Well, as I said, it’s one of the reasons why – again because of the way we have managed to develop and grow the economy over the last few years and managing the finances really properly and well this country, we’ve been able this year to make sure that local government has actually, as I say, 1.3 billion more in money. But I know Richard and Barry and they –

MH: How much more? It’s less than one per cent according to the National Audit Office in terms of a real terms increase in core
spending power. So that may be the way it’s going but it’s tiny compared to what’s been lost.

BL: Well, consistently that core spending power’s been able to increase. And actually –

MH: By a small amount.

BL: - as I say, when you look at the statistics people often talk about that grant from central government. That is no longer the future of how local government’s financed. As I say, the big shift was when we started moving business rates retention back to local authorities, so it doesn’t –

MH: So the Conservative council leaders who say there isn’t enough money, we’re short of money, we can barely manage, are they wrong?

BL: Well, it differs around the country. As I say, there are some local authorities who are doing some fabulous work, making sure they’re delivering more for less. There are other local authorities –

MH: So Barnet and Derbyshire are wrong?

BL: Well, Barnet is actually a very good example Richard runs a very, very efficient council there. They’ve been –

MH: In very difficult circumstances, it sounds like, where he says there’s no money. Who wants to run a council with no money?

BL: Well, as I say, Richard actually enjoys leading the council, he’s a very good council leader. And let’s remember, won control back from Labour in the local elections last year because of the good work and the good outline of what the Conservative council are doing. But we’re not denying the fact that we inherited such a bad economic situation back in 2010 we had to make some very, very tough decisions. Local government has had to take a good part of that because it does account for a quarter of all public spending.

MH: Meanwhile the European Parliament elections are just around the corner. When are you going to be launching your campaign for those?

BL: Well, I’m absolutely focused at the moment on the local elections on the 2nd May.
MH: They’ll be over on Thursday.
BL: Yeah, but there’s a few important days between now and Thursday for eight and a half thousand councillors. We’ve got 96 and a half per cent of the country having Conservative representation. Labour have only managed 77.
MH: But they will be over within days. The other parties have launched their European election platforms already.
BL: Actually as a government our first priority is to not to have to fight the European elections. I think we should be looking to do everything we can to respect that 2016 referendum. If and when we’re at the point where we know we are definitely fighting those European elections, then we will take some decisions about that.

MH: They’ve been legislated for already, so are you going to have a European Parliament election launch?
BL: They had to be legislated because of the timetable, but there is still the possibility for parliament to approve the withdrawal agreement so that we don’t have to have those European elections.

MH: Are you bringing it back there next week?
BL: Well, as I say that’s a matter for the business managers. There is still time for parliament to approve that agreement so that we don’t fight those elections.

MH: Alright. Nevertheless, if you look at what is being said by your MPs, by your councillors, by your local authority – by your local Conservative Associations as well, it’s a picture of anger and disquiet about the leadership at the central level. Let’s just look at what some of your MPs are saying. Some of them actually sound rather taken by the Brexit Party. Did you know that Lucy Allan has been talking about what fantastic candidates they have at the European Parliament elections? Usual party loyalties are likely to be eclipsed?
BL: Well, that’s not quite what Lucy said. But what I would say is I hope that between now and the local election – sorry, the European election polling day on 23rd May, if we have to have those elections, over the next few weeks I hope the Conservative members, colleagues, volunteers, activists, will come to want to not just vote for but campaign for Conservatives to get elected, because obviously Conservative representation is better than any other party. And as I say, I appreciate – I’m coming back to the local elections – we’ve seen time and again Conservative local authorities are better, they deliver more for less. They do better on recycling, they fill more potholes, the same applies at ever level.

MH: How will you guarantee that in the European Parliament elections every Conservative MP and councillor will vote Conservative?

BL: Well, I hope every Conservative MP and councillor –

MH: You can’t guarantee it though, can you?

BL: I don’t know what people do in the privacy of a ballot box. But what I do know is that Conservative members, Conservative MP and councillors know that our –

MH: But to not be able to say that, yes, they will all vote Conservative?

BL: Well, yes, I would want them all to vote Conservative, and I hope that they will. Because Conservative representation is better than any other party. And let’s remember just one really important thing on this, in parliament we are the only party that is working and consistently has voted to leave the EU.

MH: When nearly 800 of your councillors were questioned for a survey, 40 per cent of them said that they would be voting for the Brexit Party. Nearly half of them said they’d be voting for Nigel Farage’s new party.

BL: Well, I’ve got eight and a half thousand councillors up for election on Thursday, two thirds of which we are defending. I
want to make sure we get as many of them elected as possible and our candidates give people good representation. And as I say, if we have to fight these European election – I fully appreciate the huge frustration of people, particularly our members and councillors have that we haven’t left the EU yet. We might have to fight these elections at all. But if we do I hope they’ll vote Conservative.

MH: But there’s an impact, isn’t there, on the money you have available to fight these elections as well. Nick Davies, your Chief Executive and Treasurer, has said that the party’s been deserted by leave and remain votes, that he is unable to run a Conservative Party machine that’s capable of winning elections.
BL: That’s actually not what our Treasurer said. 2018, for example, was a record peacetime fundraising year for our party. So we've been able to grow our campaigning machine. Very proud of her. We've got more campaign managers now than we've had for a very long time and they're doing that work locally, working with volunteers to work and develop and drive our local election and our general election campaigning machine. And that’s why we had good results in the local elections last year.
MH: So all these people are expressing disquiet, they don’t quite understand how good things really are?
BL: Well, actually organisationally we've got more campaign managers than before. We've got volunteers working really hard, because they’re focused on those local elections this week that affect our lives every single day. And as I say, I don’t deny the frustration people in our party have over where we are on Brexit. I share that frustration, I want to get this done so we don’t fight these European elections.
MH: Do you think the prime minister understands this?
BL: Absolutely she does. That’s why she’s working so focused on delivering on that referendum, to make sure we don’t fight those elections.
MH: Maybe if she sets a date she would be able to address some of that anger, a date for her departure.
BL: Well, actually I think her focus, quite rightly, and I think most of your viewers and the public want her time focused on delivering on the domestic agenda for our country, and also as far as Brexit’s concerned focusing on getting that deal done.

MH: We’re already in a second extension to that whole process.
BL: Well, that’s where we need parliamentarians to look to make sure they deliver in what was in most of our manifestos, which is to leave the European Union.

MH: Okay. Now, as Chairman of the party you are responsible for how it deals with complaints of Islamophobia. And you’ve previously said that you have a zero tolerance approach to it and also that you are fully transparent. Is that still the case, those two things, zero tolerance and full transparency?
BL: Yes. Our processes are transparent. And I think any case of any kind of abuse or bullying is one too many.

MH: Okay. Well, why then, if you have zero tolerance, has your office just told a member suspended for saying that Britain has an Islamic problem that she can be readmitted in six months?
BL: Well, what we – in that – not the kind of particular specific case, I don’t know the full details of the case you’re mentioning. But there will be people who do something that requires them to be suspended, and they’ll be suspended. Once they’ve served their suspension, done diversity training, depending on what the issue they’ve been suspended for –
MH: But the phrase zero tolerance seems to mean for you temporary suspension.
BL: No, no, no. No. There’s a whole range of things from – depending on what the offence is in the first place. Diversity training, through to apologies, suspension, expulsion from the party.
MH: So Britain having an Islamic problem is not bad enough to be expelled?
BL: Let me be very clear. We believe in actually trying to change behaviour. I think as a country, and particularly social media more generally, we should be looking to change behaviour. And if somebody shows contrition, apologises, understands why what they did was wrong and doesn't reoffend, I think, like our general justice system, people do have the opportunity to have a second chance.

MH: If you are fully transparent, tell me then how many people you have expelled.
BL: Well, I don’t want to go into details of specific numbers. It’s actually a very, very small number of people who we’ve had complaints about that are actually members of the Conservative Party –
MH: How many complaints have you had?
BL: As I said, I don’t want to go into specific numbers.
MH: But you’ve said you’re fully transparent.
BL: On our processes and how we deal with these things. But we respect confidentiality.
MH: How do we know what the scale is of the problem, because we know now from Labour what the scale is of their problem with anti-Semitism?
BL: It’s a very small number of people that we’ve had complaints about who are members of the Conservative Party. And we deal with complaints immediately. We deal with them straight away. One of the first things I did when I became Chairman is we launched the respect pledge. We’ve got a code of conduct people see on our website. We’ve strengthened our ability and sped up our efficiency of how to – particularly online abuse. And there is a wider issue of online abuse.
MH: Will you publish the numbers? Because that is something that Labour has done. Will you do the same?

BL: Well, I'm always looking at how we can further review and improve our processes. My main focus, I have to say, is on making sure that any form of abuse, whatever it is, is dealt with quickly, firmly, so people understand that is not acceptable in the Conservative Party, and you want to behave that way there’s no place for you in our party.

[Ends]