MH: Good morning.
JS: Good morning.
MH: Let’s talk first about the local elections. Your leader, Vince Cable, has been talking about councils being cash-strapped. Do you know the percentage cuts in funding for local councils in England during the coalition government period when you were a minister?
JS: I don’t have that figure to hand. I’m sure we can look it up and I’m sure you have it on your sheet there. But clearly it was a very difficult economic time within government and that did result in significant cuts.

MH: 25 per cent, which is actually the bulk of the overall cuts. I mean, that is something that you were part of delivering, you voted for it in parliament, and now you’re having to go round talking about cash-strapped councils. The two don’t really fit.
JS: Well, clearly in 2010 when we entered government there was a very significant economic crisis and there did need to be spending restraints. We also argued within the coalition for more investment throughout coalition and we did make some changes to the way in which that was being implemented. Frankly, evidenced by what happened in 2015, when you suddenly saw the Conservatives take an axe to welfare payments with additional cuts to tax credits and so on.

MH: Why should people vote for you in these local elections when that was your record in government?
JS: Well, we’ve been very clear about the increases in taxation which we would be prepared to make, which clearly our coalition partners, the Conservatives, were not. I mean, we’ve got a
government which is cutting corporation tax despite it being the lowest in the G20, and you have to look at what the priority is when that’s what you’re saying and yet you have the lack of money in universal credit for the most vulnerable people. The Liberal Democrats up and down the country, even in these difficult constrained times, have been delivering for local people, and our councillors have that reputation for that community politics. I’ve seen that as I’ve gone round the country, you know, from York to Yeovil, from Watford to St Albans, right across the country Liberal Democrats are making a difference to local communities. And that’s why I’m confident we’re going to see more Liberal Democrat councillors elected on Thursday.

MH: Well, we’ll wait and see when the results come in. But it’s, within a few weeks we’ll be on the brink of the European elections most likely, where your party’s message is stop Brexit. Now, there are quite a few parties campaigning along similar lines, so what is it that makes a ‘remain’ voter turn to the Liberal Democrats as opposed to Change UK or the Greens?

JS: Well, maybe you would say we’re the original and best. We have, as you said in your intro, been campaigning for a people’s vote on the Brexit deal since immediately after the referendum.

MH: But I wonder how many people remember that? Because you may have been the first but you’ve rather been eclipsed in that message.

JS: Look, if we want to deliver this, that was only ever going to be able to happen if we convinced others to join that cause. And so I am delighted that it was the Liberal Democrats saying this back in 2016, on our own, but that we are no longer the only voices arguing for this and that other MPs and politicians and members of the public, from all parties and none, have joined that fight.

MH: But it splits the vote doesn’t it?
JS: Look, if we – looking at the European elections, you know, I think it is a shame that those remain-supporting parties aren’t able, weren’t able, to come to an agreement to be fighting that together. But the wider aim of the securing of a people’s vote to stop Brexit is one where we are very much still working together in parliament and outside of parliament.

MH: You were very much in the midst of the discussions that were happening between your party and Change UK on this point about whether you could work together for the European elections. What went wrong? Why didn’t it happen?
JS: Well, in principle they took the view that this was something that they all wanted to do. That’s up to them, that’s their decision. I think that’s a shame. Part of this becomes about practicality in timing and it would have been difficult. And I understand when that was their initial perspective, fine. But you know, we are working together on amendments in parliament, on debates in parliament, and outside of parliament, when we saw that amazing people’s vote march with a million people on the streets of London.

MH: It is a really crucial moment isn’t it, the chance to take part in the European elections? As far as Change UK are concerned, they sound more like rivals, rather than friends. Chris Leslie, one of their MPs, saying the centre ground needs a fresh overhaul. The Liberal Democrats have baggage. They want your voters. They’re parking their tanks on your lawn.
JS: Look, clearly those comments are unhelpful and they’re not exactly representative of the new politics, if you like. But I think wiser heads will prevail. I think that we can have a positive working relationship. And I think that’s what people expect, us to be able to, in a very practical way, work with people whose values we share, because we need that working together if we are to stop Brexit. And, as I say, it will be a common platform for the European elections, but this goes beyond the European elections.
and I’m very confident that that joint working will continue. Yes, with Change UK, but also with those sensible MPs within Labour and the Conservatives, with those in the nationalist parties, Caroline Lucas. You know, we have a productive, positive relationship. And that’s essential. And that’s why a people’s vote is now the option that’s backed most by the public, it’s now had 280 MPs supporting it in parliament, so it’s come a long way since the Lib Dems started proposing it three years ago.

MH: Do you think your party has drifted in the last couple of years, since the general election, and before that since the referendum? Why haven’t you captured the remain vote?
JS: Well, look, I mean, there’s different ways of measuring political success. We have been winning councils, we had great election results last year in the local elections. We’re expecting a strong showing on Thursday. And our poll rating has gone up a bit since the general election, increased by roughly about 50 per cent. So that’s good. Perhaps the thing that I’m most proud of is that the fundamental issue of our time, Brexit, and the Liberal Democrat position that I stood on at the election, which was to protect the UK’s place in the EU through having a vote on the Brexit deal, that is now more within reach than ever. We have had significant success in that campaign.

MH: You have said that you think your party needs to change. In fact, you said that it needs to be pretty radical. How would you change it, how would you make it more radical?
JS: Well, look, I’ve got a lot of ideas for what the Liberal Democrats need to do, and there’s going to be a discussion within the Liberal Democrats – in the not-too-distant future, exactly, and I’m very happy to come back and set that out at the time.

MH: In the very near future, because Vince Cable says he’s going to step down in May, so you’re minutes away from a leadership election.
JS: Exactly, and that is the time to have that discussion. It’s an important discussion. But the focus, my focus and our party’s focus rightly right now has to be on the local elections on Thursday, the European elections on the 23rd May, where every Liberal Democrat vote is a vote to stop Brexit.

MH: It sounds as if you have decided to run, you’re just at the point where you can say it publicly. When you say you’ve got ideas for the party, lots of ideas.

JS: Well, I’m sure you would love to have that as your news line Mishal, but my focus has to be, and is, securing as many Liberal Democrats votes as possible. Because to anyone watching this programme who wants to stop Brexit, be in no doubt, you know, if you vote for the Labour Party, a vote for Labour is a vote for Brexit. You know, Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson use those votes to say that the British people want Brexit to happen. And if you don’t want that future, if you want a future in the EU, you need to vote Liberal Democrat, the clearest way of saying you want to stop Brexit.

(ends)