ANDREW MARR SHOW, 29TH JANUARY, 2017

HARRIET HARMAN

AM: Harriet Harman, speaking of woman at work what did you make of Theresa May and her demeanour and that very delicate line she had to tread in Washington. Cosying up to the Donald but also keeping her distance from him. A pretty uneasy thing to have to do.

HH: Well it was important as British Prime Minister that she was over there to meet the new President, but I was apprehensive because we know that Donald Trump is misogynist, he’s xenophobic, he stands against so many of what I think we now regard as British values. So I was very dismayed when I saw her sort of holding his hand. You know there’s a special relationship but she’s got to be strong in that relationship, not led by him. And then of course I was horrified when he announced this ban on people from Muslim countries and three times, once, twice, three times she said, ‘oh, it’s nothing to do with me.’ Well it is to do with us as we all know. And she obviously has to be careful as Prime Minister, but she needs to be strong as well. So I was really disappointed. I hope she’s learnt some lessons.

AM: Well she has said overnight that she’s against this policy. I’m sure we’ll hear more over the days ahead.

HH: Yes, but she’s got to learn that she’s got to stand up for things and not be cautious and then just come out against something when she’s pushed. And the problem is that because we’re in a vulnerable position economically looking for trade deals with other countries, that must not make her feel weak. She’s still got to be politically strong despite the fact that we’re at a moment of economic vulnerability.
AM: But it’s a very, very difficult tightrope to walk of course, isn’t it, because we do need these deals.

HH: But there’s something she can do about that because basically what she can do is rethink what I regard as a reckless distancing our economy from the economies of Europe and she needs to rethink that because of Donald Trump’s protectionism.

AM: I want to come onto that, but before we do let’s talk about your book ‘A Woman’s Work’ and you chart your story going forward. In the early years you experience some gross sexism, some really dreadful moments and there’s been headlines already about a story that happened to you when you were a young student at York University. Just tell us what happened.

HH: Well, what happened is I was called in by my tutor when I was at York University and he said, ‘you’re border line 2-1, 2-2, but it will be a 2-2 unless you have sex with me.’ And I was horrified and I rushed off, but basically that is very much the situation. There were much fewer people at university in those days, very much fewer women and the idea that men in positions of authority, who can actually shape your future life, can actually abuse their power for sex and that I didn’t even say anything to anybody about it.

AN: That’s what was interesting too.

HH: Because I thought nobody would listen to what I said, that he would deny it, they would take his side, he was in a position of authority. I mean that was absolutely par for the course then and the trouble is that’s still a battle we’ve got to fight now.

AN: We should say here his widow – he’s now dead – his widow is dubious about this, she says she doesn’t believe it could have happened and so forth.
HH: Well, you know, I haven’t said anything about it ‘till now because, you know, it was horrible and you know, I was risking - and I’d earned that level of mark. Why should I be downgraded if I didn’t – you know, it was a threat. And it did actually happen and I’ve said it happened now, having not said anything about it before because I think we need to look at how we make sure that those people who are put in that position feel able to complain and those people who do that are held to account. So I’m telling you, it happened. The idea that somehow I would invent it, why would I? I mean why would I?

AM: Let’s move further forward. You talk about those early years in the House of Commons, a very macho, beery, late night atmosphere, very difficult for women MPs and women journalists for a very long time and you fight your way up and you become a Secretary of State and then comes the pivotal moment really in your career where you stand for election in front of the whole Labour Party as Deputy Leader and slightly to your surprise you become Deputy Leader and you think you’ve beaten all the sexism, it’s a great triumph and then you walk off the podium and you meet the former Deputy Leader, Mr John Prescott. What happens next?

HH: Well, I said to him you know, as I was walking up onto the stage to be pronounced as Deputy Leader, you know, ‘I hope that you know I can count on your advice and your help as I become Deputy Leader.’ He’d been Deputy Leader himself for ten years. And he said, ‘no, I won’t help you.’ I mean you know that is a pity but you know what it was –

AN: and then you go on, you see because you’d been elected Deputy Leader over Alan Johnson, who was the nearest rival, and all previous Deputy Leaders will become Deputy Prime Minister and Gordon Brown didn’t make you Deputy Prime Minister. Why do you think that was?
HH: Well, I don’t know, you’ll have to ask him but he should have done and looking back on it I should have made him because actually it was important for a party, which is the party of equality, that had never had a woman prime minister, to at least have a woman Deputy Prime Minister. But the story in my book is really, it’s my story but it’s also the story of the whole of the women’s movement. The irresistible force of the women’s movement meeting the immovable object of parliament and power and we were determined - and we did make changes.

AN: And you say at the same period of time you were pushed to the end of the Cabinet table. That kind of attempt to push women to one side, still going on at the top of the Labour Party, even after you’d had your great success being elected there. Do you think there is still residual sexism across all the parties at the top in politics?

HH: Oh I think there is and I think that we made great progress with a hundred Labour women MPs that changed the face of politics which changed parliament, which changed government. But still there was a struggle as there is now and I think we shouldn’t be complacent because there’s a backlash and there are those who never agreed with the progress we’ve made and who want to turn the clock back and that kind of virus of misogyny that is coming from the States with Trump, you know we’ve got to stand up against that, we’ve got further to go before we’re truly equal. The last thing we want is to be pushed back.

AN: We’ve got some very outspoken female Conservative MPs from your part of the country just now saying they are not going to vote – Labour MPs to get rid of – to trigger Article 50. Tulip Siddiq and others. What’s your position on that?

HH: Well I think, you know, much to my regret –
AN: You've always been a loyalist.

HH: Well much to my regret we lost the referendum in June. I fought hard for us to remain, I think it’s in our interests to be in Europe, but we lost that and I think the important thing is now to acknowledge that, to accept that and to move on and to argue about the terms on which we go forward. Because actually this is a dangerous moment in terms of the negotiations and we need to make sure that we have as close ties as possible with Europe and don't cut ourselves off economically.

AM: So you’d say to Labour MPs from strongly pro-Remain constituencies, like Peckham I guess, just hold your breath, hold your nose and vote to trigger Article 50, whatever you think, because that’s the democratic thing to do?

HH: I’d say accept that result. And you know when you’re in opposition very often there is no good choice. There’s only bad choices and that’s one of those situations. My constituency voted to remain but actually I think that we lost and they recognise that we lost that vote in June. We now need to make the best of the situation we’re in and that means voting for Article 50 but then actually trying to make sure the terms are as least worst as possible.