AM: Speaking yesterday the Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, responded to stories of sexual abuse and the disgrace of the Labour MP Jared O’Mara, by denouncing what he called, ‘a warped and degrading culture that exists and thrives in the corridors of power, including Westminster.’ Diane Abbot, now the Shadow Home Secretary has lived inside that culture for three decades and she joins me now.

Diane, you have been there for a long time. Do you recognise that as a warped and dangerous culture for women?

DA: Yes. And if anything it was worse when I first became an MP. And you will remember, you were there. You would have sort of micro sexual aggression, so women would get up in the Chamber and Tories opposite would do this gesture like they were weighing their breasts. There was harassment, there were jokes which weren’t that funny. It was partly to do with the fact it’s a very male environment, 650 MPs when I went there, just 20 odd women. It’s partly to do with the idea that all these men away from home. It’s partly to do with the fact there were eight bars and the very long hours and the bars were open for as long as we’re sitting. And partly there was the notion that what happened in Westminster stays in Westminster. It was worse. It’s a little bit better now but there’s a long way to go.

AM: Now I don’t want to embarrass you in any way but did you yourself face kind of harassment of this nature?

DA: Well, I have to say when I was a new MP, I had a little boy, I was a single mother, I didn’t have time to hang around bars. But I heard from colleagues and I saw some of the gestures and the
noises that were made in the Chamber. Clare Short, who was a
colleague at that time, she tried to have a campaign against Page
3 girl, naked women in the Sun and the abuse she got. Not just
from the Sun itself but from other MPs. It was appalling. People
would be appalled now if that kind of thing happened.

AM: So we fast forward to now and it’s still about men in power
and women in a relatively powerless situation in many cases.
Researchers and so forth. And there’s now a Whatsapp group and
women are talking to each other. I don’t know if you’re a member
of that group or you’re aware of that, but there is a different
atmosphere.

DA: The world has moved on. I mean when I first went into
parliament so many of those men has been sort of all boy
boarding schools and had really unconstructive attitudes to
women. The world has moved on. There are more women and
women actually, middle aged women are less likely than middle
aged men to believe that young researchers are irresistibly
sexually attracted to them. So the fact there are more women
MPs helps with that. But it’s still an issue and we’ve seen the
problems with Jared, our Labour colleague we’ve had to suspend,
for quite unacceptable language about women.

AM: And we read in The Times today lots and lots of allegations
about people. The question is Jeremy Corbyn said something
needs to change and I suppose the question is what needs to
change? Are you attracted by the idea for instance I think John
Mann has talked about about some kind of central figure at
Westminster who is there to receive those kind of allegations and
investigate them privately and securely?

DA: Well just this July the Labour Party’s changed its systems, so
we’re going to be setting up – where these accusations are made
people will be able to make them anonymously. We’re going to
have a special sexual harassment panels. We’ve got a special process for dealing with it and I think all parties could learn from that. But I would say this. This isn’t a problem for any particular party or faction of a party. This is a party –

AM: It runs right across, yes?

DA: - it runs right across parliament.

AM: That said, Jared O’Mara, when did the Labour Party know about what he’d said?

DA: When I heard about it was last Monday. He came to the PLP. He apologised. A lot of people took his apology quite seriously but on Tuesday we had more information, on Wednesday he was suspended and the Labour Party is looking at it. There’s going to be an investigation.

AM: Because there was a text which suggests the Labour Party were told about this a month ago and didn’t do anything.

DA: I don’t know anything about that. The party knew about it as far as I know when the allegations became public last week, and in any event this is a matter for the party machine.

AM: Now clearly we’re not here in any sense to kind of sit in judgement without knowing all the facts of anybody, but nevertheless, if these kinds of things were said by any Labour MP should they stay as a Labour MP?

DA: I think – you’re talking about the sorts - the language and the tone of Jared?

AM: Yes.
DA: Yes. That language and that tone is not acceptable in 2017. We have now moved on and the Leader of the Labour Party is very clear that we are going to be a party with zero tolerance for sexual harassment.

AM: Do you think Jared O’Mara can stay as a Labour MP?

DA: I can’t judge because I’ve not seen the evidence. What I would say is that that language and that tone is unacceptable. The party’s moved on. And you know where you have that sort of language and where you have that sort of harassment and sexual micro aggression, it demeaned and diminishes all women. That’s why it’s important to take a strong line.

AM: I don’t know if you heard Michael Gove on the Today programme making those comments about a joke about Harvey Weinstein, it’s been all over the press ever since. Do you think that’s an overreaction? Did you hear it? Were you shocked when you heard it? Were you surprised?

DA: I heard it and I didn’t think it was funny. You know, particularly in parliament making sexual harassment a joke is one of the reasons it’s not been dealt with. We’ve got to realise that it’s undermining and demeaning for women and undermines and demeans the institution.

AM: What about somebody else who’s much closer to you, John McDonnell when he said at a meeting – and I think you were actually at the meeting talking about. It was a sack Esther McVey meeting and he said, ‘why are we sacking her? Why aren’t we lynching the *’ and then a word I can’t use on a Sunday morning. What did you think when you heard that?

DA: I wasn’t at that meeting.
AM: You weren't at that meeting? What do you think about it?

DA: I wasn't at that meeting. I believe he was quoting from somebody else, but let me repeat, it undermines the case against sexual abuse and sexual harassment if we try and make it a problem of a particular party, of a particular faction.

AM: I absolutely accept that. I'm only asking you because as it were this is your bit of the party and your faction of the party and everybody has to call everybody out on these kind of things in their own institutions in their own organisations as well. I mean Jess Phillips who's Chair of the Women's PLP said, 'the targets of this vitriol when it turns to violent vitriol we should kill Thatcher, we should lynch Esther McVey. The common denominator always seems to be the one thing that these people are women.'

DA: Yes, sexual abuse and abuse of women has been a problem for a very long time and as I say it's a problem in all parts of parliament.

AM: But including on the Left? As well as the right?

DA: You know making this a kind of party political thing –

AM: I'm not trying to make it party political. I'm just wanting you to acknowledge that it affects your part of politics as well as the other lot.

DA: With respect, Andrew one of the first things I said is this is about parliament as a whole. It's not the preserve of any one party and I'm sticking to that because I know that's correct. And once you start to make it a kind of tit for tat and a kind of finger pointing and a kind of party or a factional thing, actually you undercut what ought to be a move forward to eliminate this type of talk from parliament as a whole.
AM: Do you think this is a moment when the actual culture is changing and that men across parliament or in the BBC or anywhere else are now going to look at what’s on the front pages and change their behaviour? Is this an important moment?

DA: I hope so. Because although parliaments long had this toxic climate as Jeremy referred to in his speech yesterday, I don't believe that broadcasting or newspapers for instance are any better and I do hope that in the aftermath on the revelations about Harvey Weinstein and the film industry and modelling, that all male dominated professions will look at the way women are treated, disrespected and spoken about and we can see a change in attitudes.

AM: We haven’t talked here since the General Election campaign. During that campaign you were singled out and treated very, very aggressively by some parts of the media and indeed by other politicians. Theresa May kept using your name. Diane Abbott, Diane Abbott, Diane Abbott again and again and again. Do you think you were unfairly singled out? Were you being victimised in some sense during that campaign?

DA: Well I know I was singled out. I was rung early in the campaign by a colleague fighting a marginal constituency and she said there were lorries going around her constituency where there was a picture of me and Jeremy on it, which is –

AM: Why do you think that was?
DA: And – and also the Tories spent a lot of money on targeted Facebook advertising about me. I think they spent more money on me than anybody else.

AM: Do you think it was about the colour of your skin?
DA: You would have to ask them but there’s no question that of all the front bench, of all the Labour front bench I was singled out. The Daily Mail had I think 12 pages on me and Jeremy and John McDonnell, although Jeremy has said they should do 24 pages next time and we’ll get even more votes.

AM: It was a torrent on you. Did you at any point think, do you know what, I’ve had enough of this, I can’t put up with this any longer, I’m going to leave public life?

DA: It as very difficult but you know I got fantastic support. Both from my friends and family but people in the constituency and people are still very supportive now. Fortunately the British people are better than the tabloid press and some of their politicians.

AM: Can I ask you about Brexit – we haven’t even mentioned Brexit yet. Changed days. You have been very, very clear that abolishing free movement is connected in your view to anti immigrant racism, is what you’ve said. And yet when we leave the EU, which we will almost certainly do in March 2019, you may well be the person who ends free movement. A lot of people who voted for Brexit don’t still understand what the Labour Party’s position is going to be on free movement and migration after we have left the EU.

DA: Well first of all lots of perfectly respectable people voted for Brexit. Tony Benn, who both you and I knew, he would have voted for Brexit had he been alive for the referendum. He always argued for coming out of the European Union. But, there’s an anti-immigrant undercurrent, a kind of Nigel Farage narrative which was not something which Tony Benn would have had any time for. When we leave the single market free movement falls because free movement is part of being in the single market.
AM: So if you were a voter who decided they wanted to vote or Brexit because they wanted fewer people coming here from the EU will that happen under a Labour government?

DA: Under a Labour government we will have fair rules, managed migration, we will deal with some of these predatory employers who are using immigrants. It’s not just European immigrants but immigrants from other parts of the world to undercut British workers. We will deal with that and we have spoken about the things we will do.

AM: To put it brutally and coarsely perhaps there’s a lot of people out there who want fewer Polish people here, fewer French, fewer Spanish people arriving here and still don’t know whether that will be the case under Labour.

DA: If people want fair rules and managed migration but if they also want a jobs Brexit and a Brexit which doesn’t hard the economy, they should be voting Labour and many of them did in fact.

AM: One final question, in this morning’s papers you’ll have seen a report that prisoners are to get the vote, certainly in some circumstances. What is the Labour position on that?

DA: Our position is I mean the European Court of Human Rights has been saying for some years that we can’t stop all prisoners having the vote. And the Labour Party believes that we should indeed in the end we have to support the position of the European Court of Human Rights.

AM: So prisoners should have the vote as far as you’re concerned?

DA: It’s not whether they should have the vote, it’s whether we should abide by the European Court of Human Rights and I think
abiding by the European Court of Human Rights, whether we're in the EU or not, but abiding by those human rights issues is very much a tenet of the type of socialism I believe in.

AM: One final question, I'm sorry I forgot it earlier on. Do you think a Labour government would or should recognise the Catalans as an independent state?

DA: Oh.

AM: Nice easy one for you.

DA: The Catalan, I mean it’s a very difficult and tragic situation. That we would want to see it resolved by negotiation and we would want to see it resolved under the laws and legislation of Spain.

AM: But the government has been clear, the government here has been clear that they would not recognise an independent Catalonia. I’m just wondering if the Labour Party position is the same or different.

DA: We are clear that this has to resolve by negotiation. The pictures that we saw, that you saw of what happened when the Catalans tried to have the referendum, the violence and the police, they were dreadful, no one wants to see those in a fellow European country.

AM: All of this is true but it’s not quite an answer to my question.

DA: We believe that the situation should be resolved by negotiation. It’s not for us to cut across the laws and constitution of another country.