

**Lex Fridman Podcast #450 - Bernie Sanders Interview**

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**Lex Fridman**

The following is a conversation with Bernie Sanders, senator from Vermont and two-time presidential candidate, both times as the underdog who, against the long odds, captivated the support and excitement of millions of people both on the left and the right. This is the Lex Fridman Podcast. To support it, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now, dear friends, here's Bernie Sanders. Growing up, did you ever think you'd be a politician?

**Bernie Sanders**

Nope. Not in a million years.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. I know that you hate talking about yourself, which is rare for a politician, I would say. What's your philosophy behind that? You like talking about the issues. You like talking about-

**Bernie Sanders**

Yeah, I do. Everybody talks about themselves. It's not about me. Nice guy, not a nice guy. What politics should be about? Is the issues facing the people of our country, the people of the world, and how we're going to address it. That's what it should be.

**Lex Fridman**

That said, there's a interesting aspects to your life story. For example, in 1963, you were very active in the Civil Rights Movement, got arrested even for protesting segregation in Chicago, and you attended the famous March on Washington where MLK gave his I Have a Dream speech. What was that like?

**Bernie Sanders**

It was extraordinary. Took a bus ride down with fellow students in the University of Chicago, and there was a zillion people there. I'm not sure if it was the first time I'd ever been in Washington in my life, but it was a very impressive moment. And what he was talking about, people very often forget about that, it was not only racial justice, it was jobs. Jobs and justice, that was the name of that rally. And so it's something I've never forgotten.

**Lex Fridman**

What influence did he have on you? What'd you learn about the way he enacted change in the world?

**Bernie Sanders**

King was a very impressive guy, more impressive, I think, than people think that he was. And what he did is he created his movement from the bottom on up. So he developed real organization, grassroots organization which put pressure on communities and officials to end segregation, to open up voting patterns. And I think what has to also be remembered

about King, which is really quite extraordinary, is he won the Nobel Peace Prize. And there was, oh, you're great, you're wonderful. But then to the end of his life, he took on Lyndon Johnson on the war in Vietnam. And as soon as he did that, suddenly the editorial pages throughout America, the establishment papers no longer thought he was so great. In fact, the message sent out, "You're black. Deal with civil rights. Don't worry about foreign policy. We'll take care of that." But he said, "If I talk about peace and nonviolence, I can't sit back and allow what's going on in Vietnam to continue without speaking out." Incredible courage to do that. And by the way, when he was assassinated at a fighting for the rights of AFSCME workers, garbage, guys that delivered the garbage who were treated terribly, low wages, bad working conditions. And he went out to support their right to form a union. That's when he got killed.

### **Lex Fridman**

So on the war front, one of the things that people don't often talk about, your work in politics. You gave what I think is a truly brave speech on the Iraq War in 2002, I believe. You voted no on the Iraq Resolution, you voted no on the Patriot Act, and you basically predicted very accurately what would happen if we go into Iraq. What was your thinking at the time behind those speeches, behind voting no on the Patriot Act on the Iraq Resolution?

### **Bernie Sanders**

It maybe ironically came out of maybe the war in Vietnam and the ease and lies that people told. We went into Vietnam under a lie. We lost close to 60,000 Americans. Millions of people in the Vietnam and Cambodia died as a result of that. So I think twice about it. And then the war in Iraq, you had people like Dick Cheney and others telling us, "Oh, they have nuclear weapons and all that stuff. It's the only way we can resolve the issue." I didn't believe it. I didn't agree with it. And you're right, it turns out, historically, I was right.

### **Lex Fridman**

What's the way to fight this thing that Martin Luther King tried to fight, which is the military industrial complex?

### **Bernie Sanders**

It's huge. It gets to the broader issue of where we are as a nation. And what I almost uniquely in Congress talk about is the fact that we are moving, Lex, to an oligarchic form of society. And not a lot of people are familiar with that term, but what it means... We talk about oligarchy in Russia. Oh, Putin is surrounded by the oligarchs. Well, guess what? What do you think is happening in the United States? So what you have right now is an economy with more concentration of ownership than we've ever had. All right? That means whether it's agriculture, transportation, healthcare, whatever it may be, fewer and fewer massively large corporations control what's produced and the prices we pay. And then you look at our political system, and we don't talk about it. What is the reality of the political system today? And that is that billionaires are spending huge amounts of money to buy this election. In

Trump's campaign, you got three multi-billionaires spending over \$200 million, three people. Democrats have their billionaires. It's not quite as concentrated. But at the end of the day, billionaires play an enormous role in terms of electing politicians and in Washington in determining what legislation gets seen and not seen.

**Lex Fridman**

But it's not just single billionaires. It's companies with lobbyists.

**Bernie Sanders**

You got it. Let me give you one example, lobbyists. We pay, in the United States, by far the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs. This is an issue I've been working hard on with some success. Take a wild and crazy guess how many lobbyists are there from the drug companies in Washington D.C.?

**Lex Fridman**

Over a thousand.

**Bernie Sanders**

Over a thousand. There are 100 members of the Senate, 435 members of the House, 535 members of Congress. There are 1800 well-paid lobbyists representing the drug companies, including former leaders of the Republican and Democratic Party. That is why, one of the reasons why we pay the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs. Military-industrial complex, you've got a revolving door. People go from the military into the General Dynamics, into Lockheed Martin, and the other large companies, and what we see there is an institution in the Pentagon. We spend a trillion dollars a year on the Pentagon. It is the only federal agency that is not able to submit to an independent audit. So if you think there's not massive fraud and waste and cost overruns in the Pentagon, you would be sorely mistaken.

**Lex Fridman**

Do you think most politicians are corrupt in accepting the money, or is the system corrupt? Or is it a bit of both?

**Bernie Sanders**

If the corrupt means that, "Hey, here's \$10,000, vote this way," it doesn't work like that. Very, very rare. Occasionally. Very, very rare. That's corruption. What happens is that if you are in a campaign... And right now, the amount of money that people have to raise, you're running for Senate in Ohio, you're talking about 50, \$60 million. Where the hell are you going to get that money? It's not going to be \$10 donations. You're going to be surrounding yourself with people who have the money. You're going to go \$5,000 [inaudible 00:09:02], etc. So you surround yourself with those people who say, "Oh, these are my problems. This is what I need, and this is... I need a tax break for billionaires," blah, blah, blah, blah. So you live in that

world. They are your financial support. They are, in a sense, your political base, so you're very cognizant of what you do in terms of not upsetting them. So it's not corruption in the sense of people taking envelopes with huge amounts of money to vote a certain way. That very, very rarely, if ever, happens. It is the power of big money to make politicians dependent on those folks. And that's why when I ran for president, what I probably may be most proud of is the fact that we received millions and millions of campaign contributions averaging 27 bucks apiece, I think, in 2016.

**Lex Fridman**

Have companies, lobbyists ever tried to buy you, tried to influence you?

**Bernie Sanders**

We don't welcome them into our office. I do deal with these guys, but it's usually on a confrontational tone. No, so they don't come into my office very often telling me their problems.

**Lex Fridman**

So how do we fix the system? How do we get money out of politics?

**Bernie Sanders**

Like many other issues, we don't have to reinvent the wheel here. It exists in other countries. If you go to... Every country has their own election system, but nobody has a system where billionaires can spend unlimited sums of money through super PACs to elect the candidates of their choice. So first thing you got to do... One of the things, Lex, I found that the more important the issue, the less discussion there is. The less important the issue, the more discussion there is. A number of years ago, the United States Supreme Court, in one of its more pathetic decisions, passed the Citizens United decision. What Citizens United Decisions said is you're a multi-billionaire. You want the freedom. You're a free person in a free country. You want the freedom to buy the government, and how terrible it would be to deny you the freedom to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on a campaign to elect the candidates. And they said that's your freedom, and that's what Citizens United is about. We've got to end that. And in my view, we move to public funding of elections. That means you want to run for governing, you want to run for Senate, show that you have some support, get \$5 contributions from X number of people to show you you're not a flake. You have some support and the government will pay a certain amount more, and there'll be a limit in the amount of money that can be spent. So it'll be a real... You can run against me and I'm not going to outspend you 10 to one. That's what we should be moving toward in my view.

**Lex Fridman**

How do we make that happen when there's so much money in the system and the politicians owe to the people who paid for their election? Does it have to come from the very top, essentially sort of a really strong, popular populist president?

**Bernie Sanders**

But you're right. You raised exactly the question. If I'm getting a huge amount of money from billionaires, do you think I'm going to go out and announce, "I think billionaires should not be involved in buying elections"? I doubt that very much. So what you're going to need, and you tell me if I'm missing something, but I pay attention, you don't hear either of the major candidates talking about that issue, do you?

**Lex Fridman**

I think what happens is when an individual politician speaks out about it, they get punished, but I think this is a popular idea. So if a lot of them speak out, that's why if it came from the top, if a president was using a very large platform to basically speak out, it provides a safety blanket for the other politicians to get it out of the system. But there has to be kind of a mass movement of it.

**Bernie Sanders**

Yes, it does. And every place I go, I always speak about the issue, and it always... People understand it. You're a Republican, you're a Democrat, you're progressive, you're conservative, who really believes that we are a democracy when billionaires can spend tens and tens of millions of dollars to buy elections? So it is a very popular issue. It's important. You're right. We need political leaders to be speaking out on that, but we need a grassroots movement to say, when somebody is at a town meeting, you're running for the Senate, you're running for the House, what's your view on Citizens United? Are you prepared to vote to overturn that decision and move to public funding of elections? Extraordinarily important.

**Lex Fridman**

So many of your policy proposals are quite radical.

**Bernie Sanders**

No, they're not. I beg to differ.

**Lex Fridman**

Okay, great. Well, they're popular. So what I mean is relative to what the way other politicians speak, it's usually a little bit more moderate. So from everything you've learned from politics, is it better to go sort of radical, maybe we can come up with a different word, versus a more moderate, safe, ambiguous kind of policies?

**Bernie Sanders**

Okay, let's talk about it. Fair enough. We talked about one issue, very important, money in politics.

**Lex Fridman**

Money, yes.

**Bernie Sanders**

Getting big money out of politics, do you think that's a radical idea?

**Lex Fridman**

Well, yeah. It's a popular idea. It's an idea that makes sense. But in order to implement it and actually make it happen, it requires to flip the system upside down, right? In that sense, it's radical.

**Bernie Sanders**

In that sense, it's radical. But if you go walk down the street here and you say, "Do you think billionaires should be able to spend as much money as they want to buy politicians?" I would say nine out of 10 people will say, "That's crazy. That's not what America's supposed to be about." So in that sense, it's certainly not radical. Let's talk about healthcare. Go out on the street, do it, or do a poll, and I've done the polling, is healthcare a human right? Should every American be able to go to a doctor when they need, regardless of their income? Do you know what people say? I would say about 85, 90% of the people say, "Of course." The idea that healthcare is a human right available to all exists, Lex, in every major country on earth except the United States. So you're here with me in Burlington, Vermont, right? If you got a car, go 50 miles north to Canada, walk into Canada and ask people, "When you go to the hospital, how much does it cost you, which kind of bill?" And they say, "What are you talking about? Doesn't cost us anything. It doesn't cost us a nickel." That's the case in virtually every country in Europe. So the idea that healthcare should be available to all or that there should be no out-of-pocket expense because it's a human right is widespread around the world and very much agreed to in this country. Bottom line is that because of our corrupt political system, we have a healthcare system designed not to provide healthcare to all people, to make huge profits for the drug companies and the insurance companies. And that is what's happening, and we got to change that system. So I'm a strong advocate, and I've led the effort on Medicare for all.

**Lex Fridman**

Okay, let's talk about Medicare for all. If you could snap your fingers today and implement the best possible healthcare system for the United States of America, what would that look like?

**Bernie Sanders**

Well, we have a pretty good system.

**Lex Fridman**

What would that look like?

**Bernie Sanders**

Well, we have a pretty good system, not great, but a pretty good system in Medicare. So it's there for the elderly and Lyndon Johnson passed that in the 1960s, a huge step forward. It is being chopped away by the private insurance companies through Medicare Advantage. But if you strengthen Medicare and you do away with the kind of deductibles that seniors now have to pay and you do away with other stuff, and you say basically right now you're a senior in America, go to any doctor you want when you're in the hospital, Medicare will pay the entire bill if you expand Medicare to cover dental hearing and vision, which it doesn't now cover. You do all of those things and then the next thing you do is say, okay, to be eligible for Medicare, now you have to be 65. First year we're going to lower it to 55, then we'll lower it to 45, then we'll lower it to 35. Then we'll have everybody in the system. So I think in a four or five year period you can strengthen Medicare and have everybody in the system. And when you do that, and this is not just me talking, number of studies have pointed this out. When you take the profit motive out of it from the insurance companies and the drug companies, you can end up providing quality care to all people at no more than we're spending right now. Because right now we are spending twice as much per personal healthcare as the people of any other nation. Incredibly wasteful system.

**Lex Fridman**

So the way to pay for the system is to increase taxes. But you're saying if you cut that cost and increase the taxes you're saying it's going to—

**Bernie Sanders**

Here's the story, and I've gotten my share of 30 second ads attacking me on this. Bernie Sanders wants to raise your taxes on healthcare. It's true, in a progressive way. But right now, do you have health insurance?

**Lex Fridman**

Yes.

**Bernie Sanders**

Okay. Somebody's paying for your health insurance. It depends, if you are working, most people get their health insurance through their jobs, okay? So if you're working for a large company, your employer is paying your health insurance, and by the way, that comes out of your wages. Healthcare costs in America are very high. And your employer will tell you, honestly, look, I can't give you more than a 3% wage increase because I got a 10% increase



in your healthcare costs. You want that? Or if you're union negotiating, you know what? They'll say, Hey, you want decent wages? We're going to have to cut back on your healthcare. That's what every union has to deal with every negotiating session. So we're paying for it through employers out of pocket. We pay through it through Medicare, Medicaid, veterans Administration, et cetera. What I am proposing is really not radical. It's what exists in Canada and other countries. It is publicly funded like the police departments and libraries are like public education. This is publicly funded in a progressive way. So right now, rather than paying out of your own pocket, if you are a family, let's just say you're self-employed right now and you have a couple of kids and a wife, it could cost you 15, \$20,000 a year in insurance costs. Well, that's all eliminated. Will you have to pay more in taxes? Of course you will. Maybe it depends on your income level, but it could be that you'd be paying \$12,000 more in taxes, but not \$20,000 more in premiums, copayments and deductibles, you save money. So it's paying taxes rather than paying money to the insurance company. You got a better deal through the tax system.

### **Lex Fridman**

So the most painful thing in today's system is the surprise bills, the number one cause of bankruptcy and the psychological pain that comes from that, just worrying stress in debt.

### **Bernie Sanders**

You got it.

### **Lex Fridman**

And just basically afraid constantly of getting sick because you don't know if insurance is going to cover it. And if you're not insured, you don't know how much it's going to cost. So you're not going to go to the hospital even if there's something wrong with you, if there's pain and all that. So you just live in a state of fear, psychological fear. That's the number one problem. It's just not just financial, psychological-

### **Bernie Sanders**

You got it. Look, and I think you said it very well. I'm chairman of the committee that deals with this stuff. So I talk to a lot of doctors. And doctors in Vermont and all over this country tell me that they're astounded at people walk into their offices much sicker than they should have been. And the doctor said, why didn't you come here six months ago when you first felt your symptoms? And they said, well, I have a high deductible. I've a \$10,000 deductible. I don't have any money to pay. I'm uninsured. Some of those people don't make it. Other people, and this is what is totally crazy, they end up in the hospital at huge expense to the system rather than getting the care they need when they needed it. So that is how... I'll give you another example of it. We pay the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs. One out of four Americans can't afford the drugs their doctors prescribe. So you walk into the doctor's office, they say, okay, Look, you got this, that, and the other thing. Here's a prescription. You can't afford to fill it. What happens? You get sicker. You end up in the

emergency room, which is an extremely expensive proposition. Or you end up in the hospital, rather than dealing with the problem when it occurs. And what is not talked about... I mentioned earlier how we don't talk about some of the major issues. The estimate is that some 60,000 people in America die every single year unnecessarily because they can't get to a doctor when they need because of financial reasons. And you want to hear even crazier, one out of four people who get cancer treatment in this country either go bankrupt or deplete their financial resources of their family. So your point is, right. If somebody diagnoses you with cancer, you're scared to death. You're worried about how you're going to live, you're going to die, what's going to happen? And then on top of that, you got to worry about whether your family goes bankrupt. How insane and cruel is that? So to me, I think healthcare is what unites us all. Everybody has family. They get sick, we all get born, we all die, we all want care. And we all have got to come together to create a system that works for all of us, not just the drug companies or the insurance companies.

**Lex Fridman**

There's just so many stories and not even the horrific stories. There's countless horrific stories, but just basic stories of cost. Like my friend Dr. Peter Attia has this story where he happens to be wealthy so he can afford it, but he had to take his son to the emergency room and the son was dehydrated and the bill was \$6,000. They just did a basic test and gave him an IV, a basic thing. And he has really good insurance and the insurance covered \$4,000 of it. So he had at the end paid \$2,000 for a basic emergency room visit. And there's a lot of families for whom that one visit for such a simple thing would be just financially devastating.

**Bernie Sanders**

And you know what? People know that, and you know what they say? I don't feel well today. Something's wrong. I ain't going to go to that emergency room because I don't want a \$6,000 bill. And what happens? He had insurance that paid two thirds of it, right?

**Lex Fridman**

Yes.

**Bernie Sanders**

So what happens if he didn't? What happens if he didn't have money? He'd be handed by bill collectors for the rest of his life. So it is a disgusting system. It is an inhumane system, but the insurance companies and the drug companies are very powerful and they make a lot of campaign contributions, have a lot of lobbyists than we are where we are. But I think the American people want fundamental changes there.

**Lex Fridman**

So that's another good example of a really popular idea that is not implemented because of the money in politics.

**Bernie Sanders**

You got it. That's wonderful. And I'll tell you that not only that, not only is it not implemented because of money, it's not even discussed. All right? So I'm saying here and no one disputes me, we are spending twice as much per person on healthcare, right? And yet 85 million Americans are uninsured or underinsured, and our life expectancy is lower than virtually every other major country. Do you think that might be an issue that we'd be discussing?

**Lex Fridman**

Again, if a single politician discusses it to get punished for it. So there needs to be a mass movement and probably, I mean from my perspective, it has to come from the very top. It has to come from the president. And the president has to be a populist president where they don't care about the parties with the rich people. They just speak out because they know it's a popular message and they know it's the right thing. So speaking of that, you had a historic campaign run for president in 2016, and in the eyes of many people, mine included, you were screwed over by the DNC, especially the WikiLeaks emails showed. What's your just looking back feelings about that? And you're angry, are upset?

**Bernie Sanders**

Yeah, of of course I'm angry and of course I'm upset. But when you take on, in this case, the democratic establishment who have controlled that party forever, moneyed interests of the Democratic Party, you're taking on corporate America when you're taking on the corporate media. And when you're calling for a political revolution that creates the government that works for all and not just the few, the opposition is going to be extraordinary. But what I am extremely proud of from that campaign in 2020 as well, is that we took on the anointed candidate of the establishment and we showed, despite the fact the entire establishment I had in the Senate, I had one supporter, there were 50 Democrats, I had one supporter, I had no governor supporting me. I think maybe a few people in the house. But we took on the whole political establishment and we did... We got millions of votes. And the ideas that we brought forth were ideas that they had to eventually deal with in one way or another. And if you look at the American Rescue Plan, which I'm proud to have helped write during the midst of COVID, a lot of the ideas that we fought forward were implemented in that bill. And I want to make them obviously permanent.

**Lex Fridman**

And you almost won. And a lot of people thought that you would win against Donald Trump.

**Bernie Sanders**

I think we would've. I think would've. Trump is a very... I think he's a little bit crazy between you and me, but he is a smart politician. And he's appealing to a lot of the anger that working class people feel. And you know what? Working class people should feel angry, but they should make sure that their anger is directed in the right direction and not against people who are even worse off the nail, which is what demagogues like Trump always do. So I think

we had, as I went around the country then, and now we have a lot of support from working class people who understand that there is something wrong. And this is an incredible fact that no one talks about. All right, I'm going to ask you a question. Are you ready for this Lex?

**Lex Fridman**

Let's go.

**Bernie Sanders**

Here we go. Over the last 50 years, there's been a massive increase in worker productivity as a result of technology, right? Everyone agrees to that. And I don't know exactly what is, but the worker today is producing a lot more than the work of 50 years ago doing something similar. Is the worker today in real inflation accounted for dollars making more money than that work 50 years ago?

**Lex Fridman**

Well, there's a lot of close arguments there, but your point is well taken. It's either the same or a little bit higher or a little bit lower, depending on the statistics. It has not increased significantly, and the wealth inequality has increased significantly.

**Bernie Sanders**

That is the point. So you would think that if a worker is producing a lot more, that worker would be better off, would be working lesser hours, et cetera. That hasn't been the case. And what happened in that 50 years is according to the RAND Corporation, there has been a 50 trillion, trillion with a T, redistribution of wealth in the bottom 90% to the top 1%. So you got CEOs today making 300 times more than their workers. You got three people on top owning more wealth on the bottom half of American society. So that's why people are angry and they're worried that their kids may have a lowest standard of living than they in the country in the history of the world. So there's a lot of anger out there, and I think we tap some of that anger in a constructive way, essentially saying, you know what? We don't need so few to have so much in wealth and power. Let's distribute it more fairly in America.

**Lex Fridman**

I got to get back to 2016 because it's such a historic moment. So there's a lot of fans of yours that wanted you to keep fighting. Because you forgave in the end the establishment and joined them in support. And your fans wanted to keep fighting for a takeover, for a progressive takeover, the Democratic Party. If you just look back and had to do it all over again, what would you do different?

**Bernie Sanders**

Well, by the way, in terms of a takeover of the Democratic Party, we did try, we ran... Do you know who Keith Ellison is? Keith is now the Attorney General of the state of Minnesota. He's doing a great job. Really one of the outstanding attorneys generals in the country. And Keith

was then a member of Congress and we ran Keith to become the head of the DNC and the establishment for the President of the United States on down went crazy. And they beat him by a few votes, not a whole lot. Look you faced... And that's the exact same position that many of us are in right today. So people say, well, why did you support Hillary Clinton? Yeah, what's the alternative? Donald Trump? I think Donald Trump is an extremely dangerous person trying to undermine American democracy. So I can't support him. Hillary Clinton, obviously his views are very, very different than mine. But that in that moment, that's where politics becomes really tricky and it ain't easy. And sometimes you have to do things that you're not really all that excited about. But I think it was right to try to do what I could to prevent Trump from getting elected. And in 2020 I did the same with Biden and we had more success with Biden than we had with Clinton.

**Lex Fridman**

Well, there's this interesting story about a long time coming meeting between you and Obama in 2018, I believe. So Ari Rabin-Havt, who was a former deputy campaign manager, wrote a great book I would say about you called *The Fighting Soul: On the Road with Bernie Sanders*. And he tells many great stories, but one of them is your meeting with Obama. And he says that Obama told you, Bernie... I wish I could do a good Obama impression. Bernie, you're an Old Testament prophet. A moral voice for our party giving us guidance. Here's the thing though, prophets don't get to be king. Kings have to make choices, prophets don't. Are you willing to make those choices? Basically Obama's making the case that you have to sort of moderate your approach in order to win. So was Obama right?

**Bernie Sanders**

Look, and again, that's why politics is very, very fascinating. Sometimes you can run and lose and you really win if your goal is not just individual power, but transforming society. One of my heroes, you mentioned Martin Luther King Jr. who is one of my heroes. Another one of my heroes is Eugene Victor Debs. Does that ring a bell?

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. Yes.

**Bernie Sanders**

Okay.

**Lex Fridman**

For many reasons, yes.

**Bernie Sanders**

All right. Many listeners may not know who Debs was. Debs was a union organizer in the early 1900s, helped form the American Railway Union, ran for president, I think five times. Ran the last time while he was in a jail cell because of his opposition to World War I and got

a million... while he was in a jail cell because of his opposition to World War I and got a million votes doing that. Debs lost badly in every race that he ran. In 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt ran for president. And much of what Roosevelt ended up doing was at least some of what Debs had talked about. Debs helped lay the groundwork for ideas. So sometimes you can lose and win if you're into transforming society. What my view is, where I disagree with Obama, is I think you have got to raise consciousness among ordinary people. And when people know what's going on and are prepared in an organized way to fight for change, they can make incredible changes. And we've seen that in recent years. Today, we take for granted we have a woman running for president of the United States I'm supporting. We have had other women running for president. We have women governors and senators. Not so many years ago in the United States Senate, there were 98 men, two women. Even before that 1920, it was when women got the right to vote. How did that change? How did women's role in society change? It changed because women and their male allies stood up in force. Gay rights, old enough to remember that anybody I knew who was gay, you think they would talk about it? Come out about it? No they wouldn't. That's changed. We have seen in terms of civil rights, massive changes. Change happens when people at the grassroots level demand that... We talked about a healthcare a moment ago, we will get universal Medicare for all when millions of people make it clear that's what they want. So I believe politics starts at the grassroots level, and that's how you got to bring about change.

### **Lex Fridman**

So just to go back to Obama though, in many ways, he too is a singular historic figure in American politics who has brought about a lot of change. He's a symbol I think that would be remembered for a long time. What do you admire most about Obama?

### **Bernie Sanders**

Well, I know him. We're not best friends, but I know him well and we chat every once in a while. First of all, don't underestimate what it was in 2008 to be the first black president in the history of this country. And I think few would deny that he's an extraordinarily intelligent guy. Very, very articulate, one of the best speakers that there is in America, and that he and his family, and again, it's a lot harder than it looks. He and his family for eight years, that's his wife Michelle and his kids, really held that office in a way that earned I think the respect of the American people, even if people disagreed him politically. So he deserves... And again, don't underestimate. I think years ago there were people who said, "A black president in our lifetimes never going to happen. Can't happen. Too racist the country." He did it. And that is a huge accomplishment. And I think he has had some significant achievements in his presidential tenure. He and I did disagree on a number of issues. I think he will tell you, I think his public stance is that, yeah, if you have to start all over again, he would do Medicare for all single payer. But where we are right now, the best he could do is the Affordable Care Act. Well, we disagree on that and we disagree on other things, but I think he deserves an enormous amount of credit for what he has accomplished.

**Lex Fridman**

And he, like you, also gave a damn good speech opposing the Iraq war before running for president. And that takes courage.

**Bernie Sanders**

Yes, it does.

**Lex Fridman**

But then it also shows that once you get into office, it's not so easy to oppose or to work against the military industrial complex.

**Bernie Sanders**

It is very hard. People do not fully appreciate how powerful the establishment is, whether it is the healthcare industry, whether it's the military industrial complex, whether it's the fossil fuel industry. These people have unlimited amounts of money. They're very smart lobbyists in Washington D.C, and they're very, very greedy people. They want it all.

**Lex Fridman**

I have to ask you about capitalism, the pros and cons. So you wrote a book, It's Okay To Be Angry About Capitalism. That is a thorough, rigorous criticism of I would say hypercapitalism, a certain kind of capitalism that you argue that we are existing in today in the United States. But a lot of people would attribute to capitalism all the amazing technological innovations over the past 70 plus years that have contributed to increase in quality of life in GDP, decrease in poverty, decrease in infant mortality, increase in expected life expectancy. So how do you see the tension, the pros of capitalism and the cons of capitalism?

**Bernie Sanders**

Some of my European friends, they say Bernie, in the United States, you're considered to be very radical. If you were here in France or Denmark or someplace, you'd be kind of mainstream left guy. Not all that radical. So this is what I think. I mean, I think the best that we could do right now, where we are right now, it's the great a society which does two things. It encourages innovation, but at the same time, it makes sure that all people in a wealthy nation have a decent standard of living. And some countries, if you look at Scandinavia, and this shocks people because we don't talk about this at all. So in Scandinavia it has been the case, Denmark, Finland, Norway for years that people have healthcare. That's not a big thing. You end up in the hospital. So what? They don't pay a bill. And this shocks people. In America right now, we have people who will get one week, two weeks off paid vacation. Sometimes people get nothing. You know that there are people out there who have vacation all. In Germany, you got six weeks paid vacation and other holidays as well. People are shocked by that. In America, we don't have paid family and medical leave. The only major country not to do it. Other countries, your wife gets sick, you stay home with

her, your kids get sick, not a big deal. You get a certain amount of paid family and medical leave. Cost of prescription drugs are far more affordable. So what you want to do is create what's called a social safety net. That means I don't care what your income is, of course you're going to have healthcare is the human right. Of course you're going to have housing that is affordable. Of course your kids are going to have great quality education from child care to university without much cost. Every country has a little bit different. But there are countries in the world right now, I think in Germany, I think college is now tuition-free, as I recall, for obvious reasons. They want to have the best educated workforce they can. So in terms of government playing a role in a civilized democratic society of providing all basic needs, healthcare, education, housing, retirement benefits, yes, that is what we've got to do. Now, does that mean then that the government is going to run every mom and pop store on the corner? Of course not. You want innovation, you want to go out and start a business, produce a product, good luck to you. Make money. But on the other hand, in terms of even making money, we want you to be able to do that. Come up with good products, good services. But do I think you should end up with \$100 billion? No, I don't. And you know what? It's funny. I did an interview with Bill Gates, who's I think the third-wealthiest guy in the country, struggling behind Musk and Bezos I think, and he's only worth a hundred plus billion. But he gets by. And I said to him, "Bill," he was supposed to ask me questions. I asked him the question, I said, "Bill, tell me something. You're an innovator with Microsoft and all that stuff. Did you know that you'd become a multi-billionaire? And was that what motivated you?" And he said, "No." And I believe he was honestly, "I loved doing whatever. I loved programming." He was a kid. He started doing that. He loved it. He was motivated by it. Do you think that there are scientists out there who working day and night trying to develop drugs to deal with Alzheimer's or cancer that they motivate? Boy, if I come up with this drug, I'm going to become a billionaire? So I think we want to reward success. Fine, but you don't need a billion dollars. We want people to get satisfaction from what they accomplish, the work they're doing, whether it's cleaning the street or developing a new drug. So I think we have gone a little bit far, and you're right, in talking about the book was an attack on I call, you call hypercapitalism or ubercapitalism. But right now, and this is not an American issue, this is a global issue. It's not an accident that Musk is over there in Saudi Arabia talking to the trillionaire families in the mid-East, these guys, Putin and his friends, you got probably not more than five, 10,000 extraordinarily wealthy families who have unbelievable economic power over 7 billion people on this planet.

### **Lex Fridman**

Well, Elon Musk is actually an interesting case because he's investing all the money back into the businesses. So I think there is a balance to be struck and you just spoke to it, which is we can still celebrate even big companies that are bringing wealth to the world, that are building cool stuff, that are improving quality of life. But we can question of why is it that the working class does not have a living wage? In many cases, and sort of trying to find that balance.



**Bernie Sanders**

That's right. Look, I am no great fan of Elon Musk, especially in the role that he's playing right now in Trump's campaign. But is he a brilliant guy? Of course he is. Does he work like a dog? Of course he does. Does he come up with these incredible innovations in companies? Yes, he does. Does he deserve credit for that? Yeah, he does. But even in terms of encouraging innovation, I would hope that we are focusing on the important issues. I would love to see great innovators figure out how we build the affordable housing that we need, come up with the great drugs that we need to solve many of the terrible illnesses that plague people. Climate change for God's sakes. All right, do we need innovation? We're making some progress in this country. Should we do more? What kind of technologies out there can really cut back on carbon emissions? So I hope we focus on some of the most important issues that impact humanity, but reward innovators. I don't have a problem with that, but I do have a problem when three people end up owning more wealth at the bottom half of American society.

**Lex Fridman**

Maybe you can briefly speak to something you tweeted recently about Donald Trump going to McDonald's and the minimum wage, I believe of \$7.50. Can you just speak to that tweet?

**Bernie Sanders**

Look, nothing new. Trump didn't invent it. It's called a photo opportunity. I've done one or two in my life too. So you go to a place. He puts on an apron. Good old Donald Trump, just another McDonald's worker. But anyhow, he was a... So fine, he did his photo op. That's fine. Kamala Harris was in North Carolina handing out food to people who were victims of the hurricane. Fine. That's what politicians do. But some reporter asked him, they said, "Mr. Trump, are you for raising the minimum wage?" And that was a fair question because you got, I don't know how many, but many, many thousands of McDonald's workers and millions of other American workers right now are trying to get by on 9, 10, 11 bucks an hour. Federal minimum wage is seven and a quarter. You have people working at McDonald's right now for sure who are working with 12, 13 bucks an hour. So the reporter said, what do you think about raising the federal minimum wage? And he's, "Oh, these are great workers. I love McDonald's and so forth." He didn't answer the question Well, I think that in the richest country in the history of the world, if you work 40 hours a week, you should not be living in poverty. And that means we should have a federal minimum wage, not absurdly seven and a quarter an hour, but in my view, \$17 an hour. Will that solve all the economic problems for working-class people? No, it won't. It'll help. It'll help.

**Lex Fridman**

Since running for president, you've often been attacked, especially from the right about being worth I believe \$2 million and owning three houses. So from my perspective, the answer to that is most of your wealth has been earned from writing books and selling those books. And you are one of the most famous politicians in the world. And so your wealth in

the context in comparison to other people of that fame level and other politicians is actually quite modest. So what's your response usually to those attacks?

**Bernie Sanders**

Do I own three residences? Yeah, I do. I live here in Burlington, Vermont. We live in a middle-class neighborhood. Nice house. Guess what? I'm a United States senator and I own a home in Washington DC as do most senators. You live there year after year. Actually when I was in Congress for 16 years, I rented all the time, but I got elected. Okay, got a six-year term. You know what? Let's buy a house. So we bought a house and guess what? Like many thousands of people in the state of Vermont, I have a summer camp. It's a nice one on Lake Champlain. That's it. Now how did I get the money? You're right. I wrote two best-selling books, including this book on capitalism. It was New York Times bestseller for a while. And also another book was a youth book. I make, I don't know, \$175,000 a year. And that's more or less how I became the zillionaire that I am.

**Lex Fridman**

Well, I should also mention that sometimes the word mansion is used and I think your residences are quite modest, at least-

**Bernie Sanders**

Normal houses and they're not... They're middle-class houses. Very nice house.

**Lex Fridman**

So when you started in politics I read you are worth \$1,100.

**Bernie Sanders**

That much.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, that much. That's right. Has the increase in wealth changed your ability to relate to the working class?

**Bernie Sanders**

Well, it's a good question. And obviously growing up in a working-class family has been maybe the most singularly significant aspect of my politics. I grew up without money in a family that lived in a rent controlled apartment in Brooklyn New York. So that has impacted me. I'll tell you, I don't really give a damn about money. I drive a car that's 11 years old. It's an old car and money... Here is my jewelry. It's a solar watch and my wedding ring. That's about it. I don't have a Rolex watch, would not be interested in it. But I'll tell you what has impacted me, my wife who also grew up in a working-class family will tell you the same. We don't worry... You raise that issue. If we have to go to the doctor, if our kids have to go to the doctor, we go to the doctor. I don't stay up nights worrying. There was a time I have to worry

about how to pay my electric bill. I don't worry about that anymore. So what has happened that stress, that economic stress of not worrying about a financial disaster, that's gone and that is enormous. I maybe as much or more than any other member of the Senate work hard not only for, but with working-class people. I'm chairman of the committee deals with labor issues. We have been involved probably in dozens of strikes all over this country. I've been on picket lines. So I do my best. It's a very easy trap to fall into. You can get separated from ordinary people and their struggles. Not hard to do. I try as hard as I can not to do that.

**Lex Fridman**

So sometimes people say, can money buy happiness? I think I agree with you that worry, sort of being able to fill up your car and not worry about how much it's going to cost or be able to get a- And not worry about how much it's going to cost or be able to get food for dinner and not worry about how much it's going to cost. Or even, I've been poor most of my life, but I've been very fortunate recently to have enough wealth to not worry about healthcare, to have insurance, and be able to afford an emergency room visit. And that worry is just such a giant lift off your shoulders.

**Bernie Sanders**

Lex, I think you said it very well. I remember even I saw this change in myself. When I used to go out, and I do the grocery shopping. My wife does a lot of the cooking, I do the grocery shopping. And I used to look at the prices of everything, I do that less now. I said, "What the hell? So what? It costs 50 cents more for this can of stuff. So, what?" But that's a luxury you have when you don't have to worry about that. And I don't have to worry about that. But your point is, again, to me, I don't like big fancy cars or big fancy homes, don't go on... My wife will tell you we've not been on a real vacation for God knows how long, because I work pretty hard. But the major thing about having money, which is enormously important, is just what you said. I don't have to worry. If somebody in my family gets sick, I don't have to worry about that. I don't have to worry about putting food on the table or paying the mortgage. So, that's what money has done.

**Lex Fridman**

Okay. Let me ask you about the future of the Democratic Party. So one of the biggest impacts you've had is you've been in the fuel, the catalyst for the increase of the progressive caucus, the progressive movement within the Democratic Party. Do you think that is the future, the progressives, even Democratic socialist leaders will take over the party?

**Bernie Sanders**

That is the most important question, regarding to my mind, American politics. One of the successes that we've had, and I'm proud to have played a role in this, is that if you go to the House of Representatives right now, you'll see almost a hundred members of the Progressive Caucus led very well by a woman from Washington, Pramila Jayapal. Does a great job. That's people like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar and many others.

Many of them are young, often women, people of color. And many of them come from working-class backgrounds. So, what we have been able to do in recent years, elect a number of strong progressives who represent working families very, very effectively. The struggle in the Democratic Party is between the corporate wing and the progressive wing. And the corporate wing takes a whole lot of money, sees its salvation in getting a whole lot of money from wealthy individuals and large corporations. And is not very vigorous in my view, in representing the needs of working-class people. If they were, we would have healthcare for all, we would have a minimum wage that was a living wage, we would not have a housing crisis. We would not have a tax system in which billionaires pay an effective tax rate that is lower than a truck driver or a nurse. So, I think one of the reasons that Trump has had political success is, it's not so much his ideas. Most working class people don't think we should give tax breaks to billionaires or worry about the size of Arnold Palmer's genitalia. But they are angry, people are angry. And the Democrats have not responded effectively to that anger. So, the struggle that we are waging right now is the future of the Democratic Party. Will it be a party of the working class and represent working class issues, whether you black or white or Latino or Asian or whatever you may be? Or will it be a corporately dominated party? That's the struggle we're in right now.

**Lex Fridman**

Did you consider running in 2024? From my perspective, I would've loved it if you ran. I think you would've had a great chance of winning. Not just the primary, but the presidency.

**Bernie Sanders**

I gave about five minutes thought to it. And the reason was we have a slogan of the progressive movement, it's not about me, it's about us. And to have taken on Biden, who in my view on domestic issues, has been quite strong, would've really split the Democratic Party and laid the groundwork for an easy Trump victory. And that I did not want to see. So sometimes in life, and I know that a lot of younger people don't agree with me, but you got to make choices which are painful. So I strongly supported Biden, because I liked his domestic record. He's done some good things against a lot of opposition. And I'm supporting Kamala right now. But I'm doing my best to see that a dangerous guy like Donald Trump does not become president.

**Lex Fridman**

And the hope for you is that there will be future candidates that are populist, that are progressive?

**Bernie Sanders**

Yes, absolutely.

**Lex Fridman**

Let me ask you about AOC. She's become one of the most influential voices for the progressive cause in the United States. You two had a great conversation on your podcast and in general, you work together. So, what to you is most impressive about her?

**Bernie Sanders**

I really like Alexandria a whole lot. She is a young woman who comes from a working class background. She helped a mother clean houses. She was a bartender in the Bronx, New York. And I'm very proud that my campaign for president inspired her to run. And she ran on a progressive working class program. And she took on one of the more powerful guys, a guy named Joe Crowley, who was pretty high up in the Democratic Party. And she knocked on doors, she had no money. She did a very strong grassroots effort, and I appreciate that. So, that's number one. I like what she stands for, she's incredibly smart. And she has that certain charisma that maybe you're born with it, maybe you develop it. I don't know. A couple of years ago she came up here to Vermont to spend some time. She and her partner, Riley, came up. And we were out in the street and people saw her and they said, "Oh, Congresswoman." and she just smiled. And she had an approach to people, which was beautiful. I mean, it wasn't phony, it was real. But to be a politician, you got to know how to... You could be a great intellectual, but you can't relate to people. She relates well to people. And so, I think both from a personality perspective, from an intellect perspective, from an ideological perspective, she helped create the Green New Deal concept, the need to create jobs as we transform our energy system away from fossil fuel. Strong advocate for Medicare for all workers rights. So, I'm a big fan of Alexandria.

**Lex Fridman**

What do you think is the most powerful enduring impact you've had on American politics? Looking back, you've been in it for quite a bit.

**Bernie Sanders**

Well, I don't know that I can give you a singular answer. I was mayor of this city and proud of what we accomplished here, proud of my accomplishments as a U.S. Senator. When COVID was devastating this country and we had a massive economic downturn, as chairman of the budget committee, I helped write the American Rescue Plan, which put a lot of money into people's pockets. We cut childhood poverty by 40% by providing a child tax credit. We kept hospitals going, we kept colleges going, kept people from getting evicted, helped get public health out there, people getting the vaccines. I'm proud of that. But at the end of the day, I think what I have shown is that the ideas, gets back to the early part of this conversation, the ideas that I am talking about are ideas that are widely supported. So Donald Trump says, "Oh, Bernie Sanders is a far left.", it's like I'm some kind of extremist coming up with ideas that nobody supports. Everything that I talk about, raising the minimum wage, health care for all, a tax system which demands the billionaires pay their fair share, those are all popular ideas. But people didn't know you got to run for president and have 20,000 people come out

to your rallies and win 23 states. And they say, "Well, maybe those ideas are not so crazy after all." And we've got to entertain them. The establishment doesn't like that. They really don't. They want to tell you, and this is their main, this is how they succeed. What they say, Lex, is, "The world is the way it is. It always will be this way. We got the wealth, we got the power. And don't think of anything else. This is the way it is. You have no power. Give up." They don't say it quite that way, but that's really what the intent is. And what we showed is, guess what? Running an outsider campaign, we took on the Democratic establishment, we came close to winning it. And we did win 23 states. And the ideas that we're talking about are the ideas that working-class people, young people believe in.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, you showed that it's possible to win. And that's an idea that will resonate for decades to come.

**Bernie Sanders**

And out of that came dozens of candidates now in the House of Representatives, people on city council, people on state legislature who did win.

**Lex Fridman**

So we mentioned about the worry of getting sick, the worry of life that many people in the working class are suffering from. But there's also the worry that we all experience of the finiteness of life. Do you ponder your own mortality? Are you afraid of it?

**Bernie Sanders**

Well, when you're 83, it does come across.

**Lex Fridman**

All right.

**Bernie Sanders**

Yeah, of course I do. And-

**Lex Fridman**

Are you afraid of it?

**Bernie Sanders**

No, I'm not afraid of death. What I am afraid of, I think, is infirmity. I have been, knock on wood, this is wood, I think, reasonably healthy with an exception. I had a heart attack five years ago. And what blew me away was that my body failed me for the very first time in my life. That was stunning to me, that suddenly, I was in a hospital bed. I have a great deal of compassion for people as we speak, who are in nursing homes, having a hard time walking. Maybe your mental agility is slipping a little bit. That's tough. That's what worries me. We are

all going to die, and that's that. So I'm not afraid of that, but that aspect of getting older, and that does concern me.

**Lex Fridman**

That said, your mind is as sharp as any politician that I've ever heard. And also just off mic, I should say, just the warmth that you radiate. And I deeply, deeply appreciate that-

**Bernie Sanders**

Oh, thank you.

**Lex Fridman**

... just as a human being. So, you still got it. After all that, after all those speeches, after all those houses, after all of it, there's still the humility and just the sharpness, the wit is all there. So Bernie, yeah, like I said, I wish you would've ran this year, but I also wish that there's future candidates.

**Bernie Sanders**

Yeah. And there will be, Lex. I absolutely do. And I think you asked about my legacy, the idea that they're all wonderful, really, really wonderful people who are now, got involved in the political process that are fighting for justice. That's a great legacy.

**Lex Fridman**

What gives you hope about the future of this country, about the future of the world?

**Bernie Sanders**

Sometimes one can become very cynical. You look at the terrible wars that are going on right now, you look at the divisiveness in this country, the ugliness, the poverty, you look at climate change. You can get depressed from all that. But I am lucky in this sense, in that I've had the opportunity... People often, "What inspires you? How do you keep going?" And I remember, actually it was in California where it really crystallized me. I was at a rally in the agricultural area of California. And we did a rally, it was sunset, thousands of people were out. And you looked around the crowd and there were young people, black and white and Latino and Asian American, huge cross section. There were older people, and they all wanted to make America a very much better country. And it really moved me. I mean, I see that time and time, and I've just been on the campaign trail. And you see great people, really beautiful people who, not interested in becoming billionaires. They want to improve life for other people in this country. So, I am grateful that I... It sounds like a platitude. It's what every politician says, oh, blah, blah, blah, blah. But when you go out around the country, you go to Native American reservations and you go to factories and everything, and you see so many wonderful people. I have been able to see things that many others have not. I've been to every state in the country, and that inspires me.

**Lex Fridman**

I share their optimism, I share your optimism. Bernie, I've been a fan for a long time. It's a great honor to speak to you today. Thank you so much.

**Bernie Sanders**

Well, thank you very much for what you're doing. Let me just say a word about what you're doing.

**Lex Fridman**

Okay. Let's go.

**Bernie Sanders**

Return the compliments here.

**Lex Fridman**

Okay.

**Bernie Sanders**

I think there is a growing dissatisfaction with corporate media. And not because it's fake news or the reporters lie all the time, that's nonsense. They don't. But I think people want to hear folks really talk about in a calm manner, about some of the very important issues which are not discussed in corporate media. And I think that's what you and some others are doing. So, I thank you very much. It's a very important service to the country.

**Lex Fridman**

And thank you from a mayor perspective, for creating a wonderful town. And I look forward to looking at the fall leaves walking around tonight.

**Bernie Sanders**

Well, I did quite great the leaves. I did create some other things.

**Lex Fridman**

Okay. Thank you so much, Bernie.

**Bernie Sanders**

Thank you, Lex.

**Lex Fridman**

Thanks for listening to this conversation with Bernie Sanders. To support this podcast, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now, let me leave you with some words from Aristotle. "The real difference between democracy and oligarchy is poverty and wealth. Wherever men rule by reason of their wealth, whether they be few or many, that is



an oligarchy. And where the poor rule, that is democracy." Thank you for listening and hope to see you next time.