MICHAEL GOVE, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD & RURAL AFFAIRS

AM: Michael Gove, welcome. Can I ask you first of all why DUP voters and people in Northern Ireland are getting an extra billion pounds essentially because voters across the rest of the UK didn’t much like Theresa May’s election campaign?

MG: Well I don’t think that’s an entirely fair characterisation, Andrew.

AM: Completely fair, what’s unfair about it?

MG: Well I think the reason why we’re investing in Northern Ireland and it’s not just DUP voter’s, it’s all the people in Northern Ireland who are receiving this additional investment is because there are some unique problems that flow from the Northern Ireland Troubles, as has been pointed out. Everything from the mental health to the infrastructure of the province needs additional investment and the investment has been welcomed by Labour politicians as well as by politicians in Northern Ireland outside the DUP.

AM: And this was an extraordinary, blazing discovery suddenly made after you’d lost your overall majority?

MG: No. I think it’s also fair to say that in conversation with the Democratic Unionists, and indeed in conversation with our own party, we wanted to make sure that we had as secure a majority as possible –
AM: They had you over a barrel basically, didn’t they and they said a billion pounds on the nail now or we don’t support you. And you said, oh all right then.

MG: Not quite. I think there are two things.

AM: Pretty much.

MG: No. I think there are two things which it’s important to say. Of course we all know that the Conservatives don’t have a majority, we didn’t get one after the General Election and therefore we wanted to be in a position in order to provide a secure majority for the Queen’s Speech, a chance to ensure that we could govern in the national interest. And so we had conversations with the DUP, but it’s also the case that the money that is being spent in Northern Ireland is being spent in a way which crosses all the sectarian divides of the past, it’s money that has been welcomed by people not just within Northern Ireland –

AM: I’m sure it has.

MG: - but across the United Kingdom as a proper investment in making sure that our kingdom is stronger, that our union is protected.

AM: Where does it come from?

MG: Well it comes, as all tax payer’s money comes from, from you and I and hardworking people who contribute –

AM: Not quite my question. My question is are you going to raise more taxes to pay for this? Are you going to borrow more to pay for this or are you going to take money from other budgets to pay for this?
MG: Well, the Chancellor quite rightly prioritises making sure that when we have parts of the country which have suffered over the past –

AM: That is not an answer. You know that and I do too.

MG: Well yes, but your question is predicated on a –

AM: The money’s got to come from somewhere, we all understand that.

MG: Yes it has and it comes as all tax payer’s money comes from, from hardworking people across the country.

AM: So it’s not just that the Northern Irish get an extra billion pounds. If you’re an English voter you know it’s coming from budgets that you would – money that you would otherwise have spent on you. So you lose money and they get it?

MG: But you assume that when it comes to public spending that it is somehow a zero sum game in which you set individual against individual. What we want to do is to make sure that the United Kingdom all together is stronger. And by making sure that we invest, not just in Northern Ireland but also, as part of this arrangement, we’re also ensuring that pensioners are protected, the triple lock is there, we’re also making sure that the winter fuel payment that all pensioners receive is also in place. It is the case that as a result of this deal people across the United Kingdom benefit.

AM: Let me ask you in a little bit more detail about that, because this is money that has come presumably from current budgets and is going to go to Northern Ireland the problem with it is from now on every single time somebody asks for money for teachers or nurses or housing, whatever it might be and the government says,
'this is no magic money tree.' They say, 'oh yes there is. We've just seen it in Northern Ireland.'

MG: Well that argument can always be begged. You can always say well you found money for priority X, you can find money for priority Y. I don’t think anyone, including the Labour Party, argues that we shouldn’t invest in Northern Ireland. And that we shouldn’t also ensure that those people who’ve paid throughout their lives into the welfare state also receive those benefits.

AM: It’s a bit more than X and Y. It’s you can’t find money for this that or the other that the public want, but when it’s the jobs of the Cabinet, when it’s your job, when it’s Theresa May’s job, when it’s keeping you secure in your Cabinet seats, bingo, suddenly a billion pounds is able to be found.

MG: No. I think that there is only way in which we could have a secure government in this country, that’s with Theresa May as Prime Minister, and it’s also the case that in order to ensure that we have a secure and stable government over the course of the next five years that we talk to the parties in the House, the DUP were prepared to support the Conservatives and a confidence and supply basis in essence. They want to ensure, as we want to ensure that the United Kingdom is stronger over the course of the next five years and also that we have an economic policy which ensure that we continue to have growth and that we continue to bear down on the deficit. The alternative would have been to allow Jeremy Corbyn to take over. That would have meant higher taxes and in due course our economy going over a cliff, unless money for everyone. So in that sense making sure, not just that Theresa is Prime Minister, but also that Philip is Chancellor of the Exchequer ensures –

AM: Is worth a billion pounds?
MG: It ensures that we can continue to pursue the policies which are generating growth and bearing down on the deficit. But I do think that your characterisation of it – if I may say so – is to focus in on one area of public spending at the expense of every other area of public spending –

AM: I was treating it as if was a bung.

MG: Well, I think that’s unfair. I think that’s unfair to the people of Northern Ireland and I think it’s also unfair to the way in which during this negotiation decisions were taken in the interests of everyone in the United Kingdom. And the question I have to ask is of course we spend more money on different parts of the United Kingdom. We spend more money on Scotland, we spend more money on Wales – we spend more money on the north of England.

AM: But they don’t get anymore as a result of this deal, do they?

MG: No, but in the past it has been the case that we have deliberately ensure that those parts of the United Kingdom that have additional needs are supported more generously. And I don’t think anyone could say that the legacy of the Troubles is anything other than a melancholy one. We want to ensure that Northern Ireland and all its communities can emerge from that process stronger and one of the criticisms –

AM: You’ve just said –

MG: No, no, just a second. Bung is –

AM: It’s a pejorative word. I meant it pejoratively.

MG: Of course you did. It is. But it implies that this money is somehow going to the DUP on their own as though it were a
partisan deal. It’s not. It’s about strengthening the whole United Kingdom and helping people in one of its most vulnerable areas.

AM: Let’s just reflect a little bit more on the sheer oddness of all of this. You have just lorded the fact that the triple lock is now going to be safe. The triple lock was only threatened because it’s in your Manifesto to threaten it and therefore you have been rolled over and you’re saying, yay, we’ve been rolled over.

MG: No, I’m –

AM: It’s odd, you have to say. You have to admit it’s very odd.

MG: No, I think it’s absolutely right that we should – after a General Election in which we didn’t secure a majority that we should have the opportunity to be able to review how we help the most vulnerable in our society.

AM: Can we at least determine that there is not going to be another big amount of money? I won’t call it a bung. Another large amount of money paid to the DUP? Because Lord Macpherson, the former Permanent Secretary to the Treasury said, ‘they’ll be back for more.’ I think Chris Patten said the same thing. ‘They’ll be back you know.’

MG: Well first of all it was Sir Nicolas Macpherson, not Lord Macpherson and secondly the money doesn’t go to the DUP. As I’ve pointed out. You’re determined –

AM: It goes to their voters. It goes to their voters who then support them.

MG: It also goes to Sinn Fein voters and SDLP voters and Alliance voters. It goes to the people of Northern Ireland. Now I think that there is a tendency, which some fall prey to, which I know that
you don’t, Andrew, to somehow suggest that the people of Northern Ireland don’t deserve this money and that the DUP are somehow –

AM: It’s just that I think there a lot of people out there who say, yes and so do I. Across Shropshire and Perthshire and parts of Wales. People are saying, yes they do deserve it and so do I. But I don’t get it because I can’t hold the Conservative Party to ransom.

MG: I do think that it’s – you characterised it as money for the DUP. It is in fact money for the people in Northern Ireland. But more broadly than that, we allocate money on the basis of making sure that we can help those who are experiencing at any given time additional strains to those people who are vulnerable, those people who need the support of the state most. And critically also we want to –

AM: Let’s turn to them then.

MG: - we want to ensure that the United Kingdom is stronger as a result of the next five years in government and this will help cement the ties between all the people of these islands, Protestant and Catholic, Northern Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English.

AM: Well let’s turn to the people who need the support of the state as you put it. Do you think it is time to remove the pay cap on public sector pay?

MG: I think that we should listen to the pay review bodies who govern each individual area of public sector pay.

AM: Okay. Can I put it to you, that’s not good enough because the pay review bodies operate entirely in the environment set by politicians. George Osborne at the time of the last Budget that there was going to be a public pay freeze would carry on, one
percent, that is the environment in which they operate. Underneath that they then do the detail. So in other words if the public sector pay cap is going to be removed, it's not them, it has to be you. It has to be the government which does that.

MG: Well I was Education Secretary and I know that the School Teacher’s Pay Review Body is not the poodle that you depict it as.

AM: Not a poodle but they work underneath the overall strategy set by the Chancellor, set by the government.

MG: They take account of that but they also take account of other questions as well including the number of people who are entering the profession and whether we need to have an increase in pay in order to ensure that we get the very best people in the profession. These pay review bodies have been setup in order to ensure that we can have authoritative advice on what’s required in order to ensure that the public services on which we rely are effectively staffed and the people within them are effectively supported. And my friend, Jon Ashworth was on earlier, he made it clear that it’s Labour Party policy to listen to what the pay review bodies do.

AM: The same fudge as you, if I may say so.

MG: No.

AM: Here is the NHS Pay Review Body Report, March, 2017. ‘Public sector pay policy has been set out by the UK Government until 2019 to 2020 and provides the context for our recommendations in England’. So I ask you again, as Michael Gove, as an individual man sitting there, would you like to see the public pay cap removed?

MG: I think we should respect the integrity of that process. I’m not an individual. I am a member of the government and a member of a collective team and the collective view of
government policy, which helpfully was endorsed by the Labour Party spokesman Jon earlier, is that we should respect the integrity of the process. One of the things about government is that you don’t exercise your views on the basis of whim. You’ve written a brilliant article in the Sunday Times today making it clear that sometimes you have to suppress your own views, Andrew.

AM: Flattery will get you nowhere at all.

MG: You sometimes have to suppress your views. I sometimes might suppress mine in order to ensure that we can operate successfully as an elected team.

AM: I do understand that but you mentioned a moment ago that you were Education Secretary. Justine Greening, your successor is now asking for an extra billion pounds to ensure that in terms of per capita student funding the funding goes up, the per capita figure. Is she right to do that?

MG: I think she’s right to review how we spend our money in education but having been Education Secretary I wouldn’t want to second guess Justine’s encumbrance. She’s doing the job incredibly well and she wants to review how money is spent so I won’t – I won’t presume to give her instructions on that matter.

AM: Do you think that the election result means that we can’t go through a period where we have continued per capita cuts to student funding, to school funding?

MG: Well, what we had overall and then these are, you know, I was going to say to be precise, we have had the overall school’s budget protected. But of course as the population has grown that’s meant that the amount per capita has come under strain.

AM: Exactly, has gone down.
MG: Justine is reviewing that and again I would not want to second guess the decisions that she should make on that with the support of the Chancellor.

AM: Damian Green said in a speech yesterday that it was time to have a national debate about the whole tuition fees issue. As you know lots and lots of younger voters went out and voted Labour because they don't like the idea of tuition fees and they'd like them to be repaid and the system to be changed radically. Damian Green suggested that your party has to engage in a serious conversation about that. Do you agree with him?

MG: Yes, I do and I think we should have a conversation about it, but it’s important again to look at Damian’s remarks and what he actually said. He was pointing out that the current system ensures that higher education is properly funded in a way that it isn’t in other countries and also the current system is fair in that those who go on after they leave –

AM: So to be clear, if you get rid of it you then have to find the money from somewhere else.

MG: But Andrew, Damian wasn’t talking about getting rid of it. What Damian was saying what I believe is that if we have to fund higher education and if people who get university degrees go on to earn well, which is good, they should pay something back. And that’s what the current system does. It’s wrong if people who don’t go to university find that they have to pay more in taxation to support those who do. I believe fundamentally that the purpose of government policy is to support everyone equally and if you don’t benefit from a university education you shouldn’t have to pay additionally to support those who do.
AM: Are taxes in this government are going to have to go up slightly as Oliver Letwin and your distinguished predecessor Chris Patten has suggested.

MG: I don’t see any reason why they need to. But again you’re inviting me, and it’s very flattering, to give advice to the Education Secretary, to give advice to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I think the Chancellor of the Exchequer will know exactly how to move the levers in order to make sure that the economy works even better when it comes to the budget.

AM: You are chastising me for not sticking to your own brief, so I’m now going to return to your brief. Is this headline true? The headline says, ‘no foreign fishing in our waters.’ Is it going to be completely banned once we leave the London Convention?

MG: Well, fishing within the immediate area around our waters, six to 12 miles, yes, we will be saying that we’re taking back control and we will in due course –

AM: No French, no Spanish boats at all in those waters?

MG: We will have control. We can decide the terms of access. And then we will also be able, when we leave the European Union we’ll become an independent coastal state, and that means that we can then extend control of our waters up to 200 miles, or the median line between Britain and France or Britain and Ireland, and that means that we then decide. Now, of course we can then negotiate with other countries about their access –

AM: So it might not be true. There may well be French and Spanish boats still fishing?
MG: There’s no foreign fishing in our waters in this six to 12 mile zone. But what it is, is our deciding on which basis we allow people in. Because let’s face it –

AM: Isn’t there a problem with the Irish? Isn’t there a border problem in terms of extending our fishing area too close to the Irish Republic?

MG: There is a specific technical arrangement between Britain and Ireland, called the Voisinage Agreement, and I suspect this may be the first – I don’t imagine it’s the last time – that the Voisinage Agreement is discussed on the Andrew Marr programme.

AM: Many people will be hoping it’s the last time. Can I move on to farming?

MG: No. Because I think the one critical thing about the Common Fisheries policy is that it’s been an environmental disaster. And one of the reasons why we want to change it is that we want to ensure that we can have sustainable fish stocks for the future. When we leave the European Union we’re taking back control not just of our waters in order to say, hooray –

AM: I need to take back control of this interview, just one thing at a time.

MG: I think – I think –

AM: I must ask you one thing without you asking, I’m sorry.
MG: No, no, but I think it’s important how you recognise how leaving the European Union is going to help the environment.

AM: Ah, that’s what I wanted to ask you about. That is fantastic, because you have said that we need a free trade deal with America and the Americans are very keen on that, but what the
American Farming Association is also very clear about is, for that to work, we will have to accept some American standards that we don’t in our food at the moment. Chlorine-washed chicken, beef created with hormones, which some people think affect cancer and puberty and so on. All sorts of GMO products, without necessarily being labelled. And as part of a free trade deal we will have to accept them. Are you absolutely clear that our environmental and food standards will not be loosened in any way as a result of leaving the EU and doing free trade deals with other countries, including America?

MG: Yes.

AM: That’s very brief. Okay, in that case let’s move on.

MG: I think it’s always a good idea to have the answers much shorter than the questions.

AM: That was a very, very long question. Can I ask you another relatively long question, which is up until the end of this parliament farmers have been guaranteed that subsidies aren’t going to come down. After that it’s a moot point. You have suggested that very, very wealthy famers who get huge amounts of money from the EU at the moment, like Sir James Dyson and others, will get less money under the new regime. Is that true?

MG: Yes.

AM: Another fantastic – let me move on. Is no deal better than a bad deal?

MG: Yes.

AM: Would no deal be a very, very bad outcome for Britain?
MG: It would be less good than a good deal. And one of the things that we want to ensure –

AM: Very, very bad?

MG: Well, I know why you’re using those words, because you’re quoting another colleague My view is that we want to concentrate on getting a very good deal, and a very good deal will allow us to do a number of things. It will allow us to have free trade with the European Union, but also with other countries as well. With no tariff barriers. That means that British food, which has a world reputation for quality, will be able to be bought by more people. That means that as we grow and produce more, that we can ensure that our countryside and our rural economy is more production than ever before. But on top of that we can also, as you were gracious enough to acknowledge earlier, ensure that not only do we maintain high environmental standards, we enhance them. If we leave the European Union we can take steps, for example, on live animal exports that ensure that standards of animal welfare are higher than ever before. So we can have a green Brexit that ensures that Britain is an environmental leader.

AM: Were you very, very surprised to be brought back?

MG: Yes.

(ends)