AM: Craig, or is it Sir Craig?

CO: It is Sir Craig but I’m very happy for you to call me Craig.

AM: Okay. I only ask because, Sir Craig, people seem to be sometimes quite squeamish about actually using titles that they get. You know, they’re given an honour and then they’re a bit, as I say, squeamish about it.

CO: I’m not squeamish about it, it’s just one of those things. Somebody said in the press this week why isn’t Sir Oliver on the title of the book. For example, Sir Alex Ferguson didn’t use his title. That thought never really occurred to me to be honest.

AM: One of the themes that comes out of that period that you describe in the book, and the book itself, unmistakably and unavoidably is dishonesty, and there are three examples where the regime, the government was dishonest, I would say, and they come directly from your book. The first one is when Cameron said again and again and again that under different circumstances he might lead a leave Europe campaign, he might be in charge of the Leave campaign, get us out. Reading your book, that is completely inconceivable, and in fact even before the negotiations had started you actually were organising what was going to become the Remain campaign.

CO: I don’t think it was inconceivable. I think there were points during- previous to the renegotiation when David Cameron was incredibly frustrated with Europe. The big question for David Cameron was is this an organisation that’s capable of change? Now, that only emerged over time, and he was only able to see that over time. And also I think what you’ve got to remember
about this period as well is during that period, business leaders, economists were coming up with more and more reports saying they were concerned about this. So actually can't see it as just a simple, I'm here now and now I'm there. It was across the spectrum over time.

AM: Another example, which I think a more direct one perhaps, is that David Cameron came onto this programme and sat on the sofa and I asked him directly, 'if you lose will you stay on as Prime Minister?' He looked me in the eye and he looked at the TV camera and he said, 'yes, definitely.' And you reinforced that message too. And that was always nonsense wasn't it?

CO: Well, you were asking him to speculate about his future, and what he did was he answered the question at the time. Now, the reality is you can only judge circumstances as they actually happen, and when you approach those circumstances and you come to that moment he took the decision that actually it wouldn't be the right thing for him to do. But I think to hold him to account for something he said just a few weeks before, when actually the reality of this situation was impacting on him was very different.

AM: But you describe in the book, you say in the book, in his heart there were almost no circumstances in which he would stay, and yet you were saying in public that he would stay. It's a simple thing, but it's a direct...

CO: No, no, I don't think so. I'm describing the moment where he's facing defeat and where he's learned that he is defeated and I'm describing the moment that in his heart he knew at that moment that he couldn't stay on. We discussed it, we thought about, but the reality is that only when you face those moments – and I think that's a very human thing.
AM: So you think that when I asked him that he thought he could stay on and would stay on as Prime Minister?

CO: I think he thought there were circumstances where he could stay on. And the reality of answering that question is had he said, ‘I will leave,’ at that moment that would have set all sorts of hares running at that moment. But he did believe that there were possible circumstances where if he lost he could stay on.

AM: And this is what feeds cynicism about politics. You know, politicians are asked direct questions and don’t give honest, direct answers.

CO: They do give honest direct answers that are correct at the time. And I think the reality is he’s a human being who was faced by the reality of loss at that time, and it’s only at that moment that you can truly know.

AM: Okay, a third example seemed to me, when Boris Johnson suddenly announced that he was going to be involved in the Leave campaign, we were all told by Downing Street that he had only nine minutes previous, sort of thing, sent a text to the Prime Minister telling him what he was going to do. And to many of us that seemed really bad behaviour and coloured our view of Boris Johnson for a long time afterwards. It turns out from your book that wasn’t the case, that he’d been sending texts and emails to the Prime Minister about his agonising choice for some time beforehand.

CO: Well, let me describe in detail exactly what happened with Boris just to clear that up. When we came back from the renegotiation on the morning, we were discussing what David Cameron was going to say in the Cabinet and there was a ping on his Blackberry and he stopped for a moment, he put his elbows on his knees, his glasses were on the edge of his nose, and he
looked at his Blackberry and he spent some time reading the message. And he looked up and said, ‘it’s out.’ And we all knew at that moment he was talking about Boris. And then he went through what was a very well argued, very human message saying how Boris had reached that decision.

AM: After agonising about it.

CO: Exactly. Four hours later I received a phone call from David Cameron saying you haven’t said anything about Boris saying he’s out, have you? And I hadn’t because I didn’t think it was appropriate to reveal that at that time. But what David Cameron was saying was Boris was then at that point saying he could be reconsidering and he wasn’t so sure. So actually we were in a period of not knowing which way Boris was actually going to go until nine minutes before. The final confirmation came nine minutes before. We could have revealed the extent to which Boris was wobbling all over the place like a wonky shopping trolley, as he described it himself, but we chose not to, and I think that actually was an honourable thing to do, not questionable as you say.

AM: It made it look as if he had kept the Prime Minister in the dark all the way through till the last minute, and then just dropped him in it.

CO: But let me ask you, which would have been better, that we’d revealed at that point that he was sending texts to the Prime Minister, that he was all over the place? I don’t think Boris would have thanked us for that.

AM: Okay, let’s turn to the guy who is the villain of your book, Michael Gove. You’re very, very hard on Michael Gove, you call him a destructive game player whose behaviour was shameful. He suffers from poison, he spread poison, he suffers from a vaulting
ambition and a preparedness to mislead. Isn’t the truth about Michael Gove that actually he realised what the British people thought, he could see very clearly in a principled position against the EU right from the beginning, which the rest of you didn’t have, and that he was right and you were all wrong?

CO: Well, look, I think we did have principled positions for a start. I’m not questioning the fact that Michael Gove is a Eurosceptic, that’s absolutely right and it’s a perfectly legitimate position, I respect that. But let’s look at some of the things that happened and why I describe him that way. Two days before he announced that he was going to be chair of the Leave campaign he told the Prime Minister he wouldn’t play a leading role in that. When he was leading that campaign, that was setting itself up almost as an alternative government. It was questioning policies that were only tangentially related to Europe: the NHS, the national living wage...

AM: So you saw a coup coming, in short?

CO: He questioned the integrity of the Prime Minister, saying that he was corroding public trust. Now, that was concerning to us and was not behaviour that we necessarily expected from him.

AM: Let’s ask about Theresa May in your book, because she appears on the edges of the story again and again and again. You describe her as a submarine under the waters. You’re never quite sure which way she’s going to jump. Somebody at one point says, ‘we’re not even sure if she’s working for the other side, if she’s a double agent.’ But you’re pretty negative about her all the way through. Isn’t the truth that actually again she saw it better than you guys did, that she wanted to put out a statement saying that she didn’t want to insult people’s intelligence, she said, by claiming that everything about the EU is perfect, that membership of the EU is wholly good, or that the sky will fall in if we vote to leave. And you wouldn’t let her say that.
SIR CRAIG OLIVER

CO: What I was perfectly happy for Theresa May to do was express her opinions and say what was right. And she was sincere in those and that’s acceptable. What I’m simply describing in the book is what is it like to be in the middle of this tumultuous campaign. Now, it was very difficult in the lead up to that campaign, having a Home Secretary not reveal which side she was on. When he did reveal what side she was on, it was 51-49 and was very equivocal.

AM: And that was disappointing.

CO: I think we’re agreeing with each other, Andrew. It’s perfectly legitimate for Theresa May to do that. What the book is doing is recounting what was it like in Downing Street to be part of this tumultuous situation.

AM: In that story, again and again and again, you’re very, very angry about what you call the lies of the Leave side, and the behaviour of the media swallowing these lies, including the BBC not challenging them enough. And yet from your point of view, your side, terrible things were said which turned out not to be true. Above all, the punishment budget, we were going to have an absolutely ferocious budget if we voted to leave. Now, we know that’s not true because it hasn’t happened.

CO: Well, let’s take two things in there, you were saying about the Leave campaign. The Leave campaign was prepared to say that we spend £350 million a week on the EU which could go to the NHS. Not true. There is going to be an EU army and Britain will be forced to join it. Turkey is joining –

AM: That might be true.
CO: Britain is going to be forced to join an EU army? That’s not true. Turkey is joining the EU in the next few years and millions of people will come to this country. That’s not true.

AM: What about your side?

CO: No, I’m dealing with that point, you’ve put that point to me. In terms of our side, let’s talk about what was then called the punishment budget. What George Osborne was trying to do there was say independent economic experts were saying there’s going to be a 30 to 40 billion pound black hole in our economy. Now, you can deal with that by raising taxes, you can cut public spending or you can raise borrowing. And he said –

AM: The sky would fall, and it’s still there.

CO: Well, look, nothing has happened yet. We are still members of the EU on the same terms that we were on the 23rd of June. But I would point out the fact that yes, there’s been some good economic news, but we’ve also seen the currency drop 15 per cent from peak. We’ve had growth forecasts next year downgraded. And we’ve also, interestingly, had the Chancellor of the Exchequer saying he’s going to reset fiscal policy. Now, that sounds like a lot more borrowing to me. Let’s wait and see. And let’s find out what happens at the end of this programme.

(ends)