AM: How big a blow has it been that you have lost the entire Social Mobility Commission overnight?

JG: Well, Alan Milburn and I both care deeply about social mobility and equality of opportunity.

AM: He said that and he said that you wanted to keep him on. Is that true?

JG: I’m not going to get into the discussions we have inside government. He has done a fantastic job. But his term had come to an end and I think it’s about getting some fresh blood into the commission. What I don’t agree with him about –

AM: The whole lot went. You know, Gillian Shepherd, a former Conservative Education Secretary went.

JG: We were already under a recruitment process actually for new commissioners. But what I don’t agree with Alan about is his characterisation of the government. Actually what we’re doing is a transformational series of policies across government to drive equality of opportunity –

AM: Sorry, but the four people that you have put into place to oversee that say nothing is happening. You’re talking the talk and the words are great, but you are not walking the walk. Surely people are going to believe them?

JH: Well, I absolutely don’t agree with them. When you look at what we’re doing in my own area, we have set up opportunity areas working inside and outside schools in communities to
improve educational results. In school standards overall, they’re continuing to rise. Now, one point nine million more children in great primary and secondary schools who wouldn’t have been before. But going beyond that look at the technical education reforms that we’re bringing forward. And of course today announcements around mental health, which will remove some of the barriers that hold people back.

AM: We’ll come on to that. But as a politician don’t you look at this country and you look at those areas of extreme deprivation and you think something really bad is going wrong here? The Joseph Rowntree Foundation tomorrow are going to say that in terms of poverty for pensioners and for children, things have got worse in a way that hasn’t happened for 20 years. There is a quiet, slow but real crisis in this country.

JG: I think there is a real problem that we need to fix. Britain is not a country where we have equality of opportunity, where you grow up affects your future far too much.

AM: Absolutely. And you’ve been in government for seven years.

JG: Your circumstances affect your future far too much. This is a generational challenge. But actually when you look at the results of what we’ve achieved – so you just asked about the fact we’re in government, absolutely right. What are seeing happening? We’re seeing standards in our schools rise. Critically we’re seeing the attainment gap in schools narrow. This is the difference in outcomes between disadvantaged children and their better off peers. We’re bringing forward our reforms in technical education that will mean the half of our young people who don’t go to university, they will get every bit as world class an education offered to them post-16 as those that do go on. We’re mobilising British business to make sure they’re providing the opportunities
in our country for young people on their doorstep. And of course, my attitude on all of this is that –

AM: You certainly talk the talk. I’m just saying out there it doesn’t seem to be working.

JG: And I’m saying to you that we’re delivering actually.
AM: Oh okay.

JG: So results are getting better.

AM: I want to come onto –

JG: I’m saying we’re continuing that, that same work. We’re making sure we’re doing it in the places where it needs to happen and it’s most important.

AM: I promise I will come on to schools in a moment. Before I do I want to ask you a little bit about the other big story of the day, which is these new red lines on Brexit. A free trade deal without tariffs to be agreed by March 2019 before any over whatsoever. No European Court of Justice jurisdiction during the transitional period, free movement to end in March 2019, and all of the rest of it. To some people this looks like a very tough series of new demands just before an absolutely critical summit. Do you think this is helpful to the Prime Minister?

JG: I think everyone needs to get behind the Prime Minister. She’s got an immensely challenging job going to the EU and negotiating our terms by which we will leave the European Union. It’s very important that we speak with one voice, but I think the Cabinet has set with the Prime Minister our negotiating stance. She’ll go and try and get the best possible deal.

AM: So these are voices off as far as you’re concerned?
JG: I think there’s a understandable debate in our country about how to go about getting the best deal. This is a historic moment for Britain as we leave the European Union, and we should expect that debate to continue. So it is an incredibly complication negotiation but the PM will go to Brussels with a clear negotiating mandate. We need to make sure has some flexibility around it as well. We are leaving –

AM: You’re not trying to box her in too much?

JG: Well, we are leaving the EU, and that means the destination is clear. We will be outside of the European Union. We hope to have a strong trading agreement. We’ll be outside the customs union, outside the single market and outside the jurisdiction of the ECJ.

AM: Can I jump in there? That goes for Northern Ireland as well, because the Irish border issue is a very, very important one. Is it the case that we have to have agreed a deal with the EU to ensure that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic?

JG: This is a really important area. We have been very clear, and indeed it was interesting to listen to Simon Coveney, the Irish Foreign Minister. I don’t think there’s actually any difference between what the government of Ireland and the government of the United Kingdom want. So that is a good place to be. And what we now need to do is set about working out how we can make sure we broadly keep, as he said, the status quo in terms of what people and businesses experience across the border every day post-Brexit. But I think there’s a real will there to make sure we work through that. But Andrew, the final point –

AM: I just want to nail this bit down a little bit if you don’t mind. Because the government’s own White Paper on Northern Ireland makes it absolutely clear that if we don’t get a deal with the EU
there will have to be hard border, which would be disastrous. So in terms of the Irish border, no deal is a very bad answer isn’t it?

JG: We want to reach a deal of course. So does the Irish government. I think across the whole of the EU negotiation nothing will quite be agreed until everything’s finally tied down. The Irish border is an incredibly important element of this, but even when we’ve got that resolved there will be further areas where we reach very tricky questions of how we manage to make sure we make things work when we are leaving the EU, when we’re outside. And so I think we should expect a continued series of questions to arise, but that’s the whole point. We need to go through negotiation, find settlements for these areas, and then hopefully make sure that we implement the decision people took in June last year.

AM: Let’s turn to your mental health announcement today. £300 million you said, is that new money?

JG: It’s new money coming in and it’s important because when we go back to some of the issues that we’ve just been talking about around social mobility we know that some of the barriers that young people face are often when they have mental health challenges that aren’t properly addressed.

AM: So this is completely new money and because we talk often about structures and in theoretical and abstract terms, if I’m a parent with a child at school who has mental health issues, or I’m a child at school who has mental health issues, what will I notice changing?

JG: Well first of all it’s fair to say there’s a huge amount of work that schools already do, but what you’ll see change is more structure on those relationships and more provision. First of all a senior designated lead in every school on mental health, so young
people really knowing where they can go to get help, but also for that person in the school who’s taking that lead role, more support from mental health support teams.

AM: So more clarity really. More – this is where you go, this is what you do?

JG: Well also more support. So more support that they can drawn down on when they want to take preventative action to help young people early. And of course more training in schools as part of that for those people playing a lead role.

AM: Do you accept there is a real problem in this county for special educational needs children? There’s almost a 60% rise in such children being home schooled. In other words their parents are taking them out of school because they’re not getting the support they need and at the same time more and more parents whose children have special needs are actually taking their local authorities to court to get what they require from the school. That does not sound like a system that’s working.

JG: Well we’ve actually changed the system, Andrew.

AM: In what way?

JG: Well there was a very narrow assessment of a child’s needs in relation to if they were SEN and just purely looking at what their educational needs are. We’ve now broadened that out, so you look at their care needs but also their health care needs as well. Three quarters of parents and indeed young people affected by our changes say that they think it’s much, much better. There is a variability in delivery of that across the country and that’s why last week we announced a further £45 million for local authorities. But overall we’re moving in the right direction, I think we’ve made some important changes and the final point in this really is that
they extend now up to the age of 25. Before there was provision for young people but it finished at 18 and we've now extended that to take them into their adulthood.

AM: Moving onto another big story we haven’t talked about, is it okay to watch porn at work?

JG: Well. There are clear laws. I think most employers would say it wasn’t acceptable.

AM: Was not acceptable. Do you fear that there is a police vendetta going on against one of your colleagues, that it’s more about getting this person, rogue police officers who have left work and are going for a senior politician because there’s a personal vendetta. Is that what you fear?

JG: Look, I think there’s two parts to this. One is obviously the Cabinet Office review into the behaviour of Damian Green. The second is I think any steps the police need to be taking in relation to what would seem to be a breach of police professionalism in breaching privacy. So I think there’s two parts. Neither of them are ones if you like that I think I should step into, but I think it is important that we have high standards in public life.

AM: Would you like – speaking of high standards in public life – would you like to see President Trump come here in February?

JG: Well, I don’t think the tweets over the past week have particularly helped make any such visit a positive one. I think many people alongside the Prime Minister –

AM: You were pretty offended by them.
JG: Well I think he was wrong to make those tweets and I think of course Britain First as a group is beyond the pale. So you know, I don’t think they deserve any publicity personally.

Ends