AM: Welcome back, Ruth Davidson.
RD: Well, thank you Andrew. It’s good to be back.
AM: You must look south of the border and be aghast at your party’s performance.
RD: I’m very sorry for over a thousand hardworking Tory councillors that lost their seats. But I think that the story from the local government elections was not just the kicking of our party but, you know, that our main opposition party at this point in the cycle should be looking to put on hundreds of seats, and they lost seats too. So I think there was a bit of a plague on both your houses.

AM: Well, plague on both your houses possibly, but this was the worst Conservative performance in local elections in 25 years. It was pretty catastrophic. It wasn’t simply bad. What do you think it says about the performance of the government in Westminster?
RD: Well, I think what it says is that people know when politicians don’t live up to the things that they’re going to say, and what they say they’re going to do. And even for people who, you know, don’t watch every news bulletin, or throw pillows at the telly every time that Question Time is on, they know that we were supposed to have left the European Union on the 29th March – they were told that. And they were told by everybody in television a minute after 11 o’clock at night that we could have been out by now and we haven’t been. And, you know, that’s something that’s easily understandable and people want answers as to why. They had a general election where 80 per cent of the MPs elected to Parliament stood on a manifesto that said that we will have an ordered withdrawal from the European Union, and it hasn’t happened. Now, I’m a Remainer, you know, I voted to stay. I wanted to stay. But even I – and the difference between Adam
and I – is that before I’m a Unionist or a Nationalist, before I’m Leave or Remain, I’m a democrat. And if we say to people that a decision is so big that politicians can’t make it by themselves, it has to be made by the country, we can’t then turn round and say that they’ve got the answer wrong.

AM: Almost every newspaper, right or wrong, believes that the solution to this, or the government solution to this, is going to be doing a deal with the Labour Party to get a kind of compromise through and Brexit over the line. And already that’s infuriating a lot of Conservatives. What’s your message to them?

RD: Well, my message to them is, look, we maybe have a little bit more experience of this in Scotland, and binary constitutional referenda are enormously divisive. I would happily never fight another one in my life. But they become more divisive after the vote, never mind the run-up to them. And what we’ve seen since the Brexit vote is that the two extremes, if you like, the edges, are getting louder and louder and louder and the voices in the middle are getting quieter. So on one side you’ve got people saying, you know, this was wrong, let’s rerun the referendum, let’s overturn the result, and on the other side you’ve got people saying look, let’s not do a deal at all, let’s just crash out. You know, let’s take our chances, and actually the answer has to be somewhere in the middle, Andrew. We need to start walking ourselves back to an agreement where we can get the majority of people in the House of Commons on board. And I think there is a deal there to be done. I genuinely do.

AM: So looking at the deal to be done, and what’s reported in the papers today on a temporary customs arrangement taking us through to the next general election, guarantees on workers’ rights and staying quite close to the single market on goods, does that kind of menu appal you or quite please you?

RD: Well, like I say, I’m, you know – to many of the members of my party I’m that dreadful Remainer that stood up on a stage at
Wembley and shouted at Boris Johnson. But you know, I respect a result was given by 17 and a half million people, including over a million in Scotland. And I’m having to walk back to work out how can we do this in a way that maximises opportunities and mitigates risks. And what I would ask –

AM: So that deal is okay as far as you’re concerned?
RD: Well, yes. I mean, if I voted Remain I voted for more than a customs union, I voted for the European Union. So you know, but I recognise that there was a vote that didn’t go my way. And I think if you look through – Andrew, if I could just say something. The public position of both parties aren’t actually that far apart here. So if both of them say that they want the benefits of a customs union, they want no quotas, they want no tariffs, they want no rules of origin, it’s just about how we make that work. What the machinations of that look like. So I think there is a deal here to be done.

AM: The only reason I was about to bust in is that ConservativeHome survey of your own party suggested that 75 per cent of Conservative members want a no deal Brexit. It does sound as if they’re being written out of the script here.
RD: I don’t think they are being written out of the script. And this is why I’ve talked at length about how – including at my conference at the weekend – about how binary referendums push people into tribes. They ask for a one-word answer on some of the most complex questions that we have. And they also don’t tell us what 17 and a half million people voted for. Part of the issue we have in the House of Commons is that colleagues, who I don’t doubt are doing this from genuinely held positions of what they think is the best sort of Brexit or the best way to, you know, mitigate Brexit, in different, forces are looking at different things. Because the vote didn’t tell us what Brexit looked like. And I think that’s the question that the Prime Minister has posed to Jeremy Corbyn today. She’s written a big open offer to say ‘let’s do a deal.’ What’s she’s saying is the Withdrawal Agreement at this
stage, this isn’t what Brexit looks like into the future. This is a stepping stone. But we have to leave before we can shape that future. And again that’s something that people in Scotland, and indeed in Wales and Northern Ireland, know something about. Because we had devolution. And devolution wasn’t a one-time event. It’s not set in aspect, it doesn’t just stay. It’s a process. And that’s what Brexit can be too.

AM: But this has already infuriated a lot of people. And as you know there is now another attempt to remove the Prime Minister. Let me read you what Iain Duncan Smith, former Tory leader himself, says. ‘As a result of a devastating election result the prime minister has in effect become a caretaker. As such, she is not empowered to make any deal with the Labour Party. Two discredited administrations making a discredited deal is not the answer to the electorate. The prime minister has to agree to go now.’

RD: Well, I’m sad that Iain Duncan Smith doesn’t have solidarity with the loneliness of leadership, I have to say, because it’s very rare that you see former leaders attacking current ones, because it’s a blooming hard job and he should know more than anyone. But what I would say to him is that the prime minister has already set out a broad timetable for herself to go. She’s already said she’s not fighting the next general election. But we need to get this deal over the line, and it needs – and what it requires – is a majority of people in the House of Commons to vote for it. Now we’ve gotten pretty close, as you said the top of the programme. You know, we’re getting closer and closer to where that middle ground might be. And I would urge my colleagues in the House of Commons to start taking those first steps to walk back to something in the middle. Because we need to get Brexit done, we need to get it sorted, and we need to allow the country to move on. Because I can’t imagine that MPs are having anything different said to them by some of the business leaders in this country, people that run organisations, about this uncertainty is so
bad for them we need to give people a view of what the next step looks like.

AM: Let’s turn, if we may to Scotland and the situation there. Do you think it’s right for Westminster to block, legally, another Scottish referendum?
RD: Well, we know from the settlement, the devolved settlement, that issues of the constitution are reserved to Westminster. That’s plainly a fact. And after the last independence referendum we had a big broad discussion about what powers should lie where. And you know, the SNP didn’t even ask for the powers to be devolved. So you know, this is a new wheeze from Nicola Sturgeon that comes up every year with a different reason for what she wants to do.

AM: Sorry, I’m not asking about Nicola Sturgeon, I’m asking about David Lidington, the deputy prime minister, talking about a so-called Section 30 order to allow another referendum, said: ‘we don’t see the case for that, it’s not going to happen.’ And a lot of people in Scotland don’t like the idea of Westminster blocking the possibility of Scots voting for another referendum.
RD: Well, look, Nicola Sturgeon, one, hasn’t asked for the powers yet. But what she has said in the last couple of weeks is that she wants to have another independence referendum in the next couple of years. Well, she used to say – and I don’t know if she’s changed her mind on this, you can ask her, I’m sure, when you next have her on your programme – she used to say that she would have the right to ask for one until the majority of Scots wanted it. Well, only 21 per cent of Scots want another referendum in the next two years. So she fails even her own test. Now, it won’t surprise you or your viewers, Andrew, that Nicola Sturgeon believes in independence and I believe in the United Kingdom. What I think we have to do as a country is move on from the sort of brinkmanship that the SNP do every year and start knuckling down and focusing on the things that matter in
Scotland. And that’s what I want to do. I want to replace Nicola Sturgeon so that we can take it off the table as a question forever.

AM: Let’s apply exactly the same consistency test to you as you’ve applied to Nicola Sturgeon, because you’ve said, ‘I never said that another indyref should be denied, absolutely not. Constitutionally the UK government shouldn’t block it. No.’ Do you still agree with yourself?
RD: Well, look, I believe that the referendum that we had should last for a generation. That’s what the UK government signed, and that’s what the SNP, what Nicola Sturgeon herself signed. Now, do I think that there’s never going to be another referendum 50, 100 years into the future? You know, I can’t look into my crystal ball. But the powers lie in the House of Commons – sorry, the powers lie at Westminster, and the SNP at the last round of talking about who should hold what powers never even asked for them to be devolved. Nicola hasn’t asked for a section 30 order, she hasn’t got support for it within her timescale, she had to get through a pretty tough conference a couple of weeks ago, and she did her annual rolling out of ‘let’s ask for another indyref. Come with me lads, independence is just over the next hill.’ Now, we’re getting pretty sick of it in Scotland. But there is way it can be taken off the table and that is to replace the SNP as the largest party at Holyrood in 2021, and that’s what I intend to do.

AM: Let me ask you about the Scottish Conservative Party, because there’s a story in the Times in Scotland this morning that if the Tories choose a hard Brexiteer as their leader – and we know what kind of Conservative you are – the Scottish Conservatives might –
RD: Well, I’m a drippingly wet one, I’m absolutely –
AM: The Scottish Conservatives might break away. Is that true? Is that possible?
RD: No. Well, you know, it’s within the gift of the party, but it’s nothing that I’ve ever supported. And indeed, my entire leadership pitch back in 2011, because I’ve been around a really long time, Andrew, was predicated on the idea that we wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom party, but with, you know, the autonomy for candidate selection, policy, financing and all of the other things that come under my purview. There was a suggestion from one of the other candidates in that leadership election that a breakaway would be something that they would look at, along the kind of German CDU-CSU model. But that is not something I’ve ever supported. I don’t support and I wouldn’t I wouldn’t support in the future.

AM: Ruth Davidson, thanks very much indeed for talking to us. Thanks.
(ends)