ANDREW MARR SHOW
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AM: It seems very likely now the Prime Minister will bring back some kind of deal to the House of Commons. In those circumstances what will the 35 SNP MPs do?

NS: We've always said our bottom line is membership of the single market and the customs union. I cannot envisage the SNP MPs voting for something that doesn't contain that. Don't forget Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU.

AM: And it's very hard to imagine Theresa May coming back with that kind of deal so it looks almost inevitable that your MPs will vote against what she brings back.

MS: At this stage I would say that is the case, but let's wait and see what happens. I don't think, sitting here right now, we can rule out a no deal and that would be extremely damaging for everybody, but what I suspect right now looks most likely is a cobbled together agreement around the withdrawal issues including the Northern Ireland backstop, but that that is only achieved by fudging all of the issues about the future relationship.

AM: So it will be the kind of waffle and fudge?

NS: So we will have what some people have been calling a 'blind Brexit,' where the House of Commons is asked to effectively rubber stamp the UK leading the EU without anybody having any idea what the future relationship is going to look like. And I think that is almost as unacceptable as no deal at all, because it would continue all of the uncertainty that businesses and others are suffering right now. Throw all of the issues that have been incapable of resolution over the past two years into the long grass,
and the cliff edge we are facing now would simply be faced again towards the end of 2020. So I would find it inconceivable that the House of Commons could give the go ahead to something like that.

AM: We’ll come onto that in just a second. What would no deal mean? You’ve mentioned it a few times, what would no deal mean for Scotland?

NS: Well, no deal for Scotland would mean all of the same horrific things it would mean for the rest of the UK. We have heard over recent weeks talks about medicines shortages, food shortages, aeroplanes have been grounded, gridlock at ports. That is unthinkable and I really do think at this late stage whatever Theresa May brings back or doesn’t bring back there must be a real determination on the part of all political parties to avoid that happening. I’ve said in the last couple of weeks that if that means requesting an extension to Article 50, that should be on the table. But what I think is really important is that the House of Commons – and the country as a whole really – doesn’t allow itself to get into the position of fire or frying pan where Theresa May says, well, the deal I’ve brought back is as good as I can do, nobody really knows what the future relationship’s going to be like. It’s outside the single market and customs union, you’ve got to accept that because there’s no deal.

AM: But if you don’t vote for that it’ll be no deal. That is the problem that your MPs have.

NS: Well, but our MPs, if we’re in that situation our MPs will try to bring forward proposals to stay in the single market and the customs union. We will push for the extension of Article 50 – AM: But we’ll get nowhere, we both know that.

NS: Well we’ve heard that for two years, I accept that has been the case for the last two years, but if people start to face the
reality of that precipice of a no deal then I do think sensible options have to come back on the table.

AM: You’ve got I think £27 million to prepare for no deal. What kind of things have you been spending the money on?

NS: Well, we’re preparing right across all of the responsibilities of the Scottish government as well as we possibly can.

AM: Let’s give people watching a few concrete example.

NS: Well for example the Health Secretary is looking at how we, you know, try to ensure that we don’t face immediate medicines shortages. We’re talking to and working with businesses in different sectors across the economy. And we will continue to do that and we absolutely accept the responsibilities we’ve got here, but the UK government, the Prime Minister is in the driving seat of this and it’s trying to prepare for things almost with one, or perhaps two hands tied behind her back.

AM: But knowing what Scotland would be facing in the event of no deal your MPs would still vote against a deal?

NS: No, I don’t accept that that is the choice that the House of Commons –

AM: Choice they’ll have.

NS: But that, we simply cannot have a situation which I described a moment ago as fire or frying pan. I think in those circumstances MPs of all parties, sensible MPs of all parties should come together and look at the alternatives. No doubt the calls for a second referendum would grow in those circumstances and I’ve said before we would not stand in the way of a second referendum, a so called ‘People’s Vote.’ I think the SNP MPs would undoubtedly vote for that proposition.
AM: It would. That’s a very important moment because they are a very important block in the House of Commons.

NS: We would of course want to talk to people about how we ensure that Scotland doesn’t end up in the same position all over again where we voted to remain in the EU but find ourselves facing exit completely against our will. But the important point here is that the country, Scotland or the UK as a whole, can’t find itself in the situation where it’s a really bad outcome or a worse outcome. There has to be space for common sense and consideration of the best outcome.

AM: So let’s be absolutely clear. If there is a vote for another Brexit related referendum across the UK the SNP MPs will vote for it?

NS: I would expect the SNP MPs to vote for that if that comes to a vote in the House of Commons.

AM: And as you say, the danger I suppose for the SNP is that you get the same kind of result as we had last time. Scotland votes to stay inside the EU, England votes the other way, most of it, and Scotland is then, in your view, ignored.

SN: Absolutely.

AM: So how can you get some kind of guarantee that you get another EU referendum?

NS: We’ll look at all options around that, but of course the fundamental issue here for Scotland is that the reason we can have change like this imposed on us against our will is that we’re not an independent country in charge of our own destiny. So a second EU referendum I think the case for that, the arguments for that are understandable, but we have to be absolutely clear it’s not the real solution to the fundamental problem Scotland finds itself in where our voice is not heard, not just on the vote in 2016 but since the vote in 2016. You know our call for sensible
compromise options have been cast aside. The UK government’s even taken the Scottish government to court over trying to protect the powers for the Scottish parliament.

AM: If you’re looking for some kind of political guarantees in that circumstance there is nobody who can give it to you, is there? I mean Theresa May can’t and won’t. Jeremy Corbyn –

NS: That’s why I’m being pretty frank. That while SNP MPs may well vote for that proposition it’s not the fundamental solution to Scotland’s problem. Now we can try to find ways – before the 2016 referendum I put forward the proposal for the double lock where the UK could only leave the EU if all four of the countries of the UK voted for that.

AM: That was briskly rejected by London.

MS: But the more these compromise options that are put forward by the SNP and Scottish government are, to use your term, briskly rejected, the more I guess – and we see it in the opinion polls today – the more people in Scotland will conclude that the only option here is actually to take our future into our own hands and become independent.

AM: Well let’s turn to that directly. A big big march in Edinburgh yesterday –

NS: Yeah, huge.
AM: - polls suggesting that if we have a no deal Brexit in particular Scotland will then turn towards independence and you’ll get the kind of majority you want. Lots of folk at your conference today are hoping to hear you say do you know what, I can tell you that immediately after Brexit we’re going to go for the second referendum. You’ve never quite said that.
NS: No, I haven’t said that because what I have said, and I will stick to this, is that I will set out what I think the next steps are when we are the end of this phase of negotiations.

AM: When is that, what does this phase mean?

NS: Well when Theresa May comes back and says I’ve got the deal, we will judge that.

AM: Oh so at that point you will say what you’re going to do on a second independence referendum?

NS: Previously I would have thought – well previously Theresa May would have said that we October and it looks as if it might be November, I will set out my views on the next step at that stage. Why is that timescale important? Because whether I like it not or whether anybody likes it or not, the future EU UK relationship is the context in which Scotland would decide that question of independence. So it will shape some of the answers to questions people have. So it’s great for me to be sitting here on the first day of my party conference with polls – a number of polls today showing support for independence rising. You’ve already mentioned the quite extraordinary demonstration of support on the streets of Edinburgh yesterday. That’s a happy position for an independence supporting SNP Leader to be in, but of course I think it’s important to get the timing right. Not just for self interested reasons, we want to have that decision when we’ve got the best chance of winning it, but out of respect to the decision that we will be asking people to make.

AM: And to be absolutely crystal clear, before Christmas you will tell people what the timing is for a second independence referendum?
MS: I will set out my views on the next steps at that stage. If that’s when Theresa May comes back with the deal and everything –

AM: It could be later this month that we hear?
MS: Well, I’m not in charge of that so I’m judging. So it could be later this month, it could be November, it could be December, but that’s what I mean just to be crystal clear about the end of his phase of negotiations.

AM: Now for second independence referendum do you accept that you have to have resolved issues like the Scottish currency and whether or not you want to go back into the EU afterwards before that happens?

NS: Before we ask people to vote again for independence of course.
AM: A lot of work to do.
NS: Well, yes although we’re making progress as the polls show, but I readily accept that in order to be confident of persuading a majority of people that independence is the best future for Scotland, then yes we still have work to do on all of these questions. Just as – one of the great contrasts of course between the 2014 referendum and the 2016 EU referendum was that in 2016 there was a slogan or a lie on the side of a bus, in 2014 we had a white paper, a detailed proposition that some people disagreed with, others agreed with, but that detail was there and I think whenever people are asked to make a decision of that magnitude then they deserve that detail and that frankness.

AM: A very simple, sweeping question, do you think that Brexit makes Scottish independence almost inevitable?

NS: I think Scottish independence will happen, so if you’re asking me to use the term inevitable, I guess yes I would use that. I
think we’re on a journey that will end with independence. I think Brexit brings the issues around this very sharply into focus. That democratic deficit that we’ve (sound goes) in the last two years where Scotland, 62% of people in Scotland voted to remain in the EU yet in what a hundred almost 200 days we’re going to face exit from the EU it’s hard to think of a better illustration of that democratic deficit than that.

AM: Let’s look a little bit further forward down the line to an independent Scotland. You set up a Scottish Growth Commission and of course Scotland has a much bigger public deficit problem than England has at the moment. 8% or roughly speaking 2%. And your own Growth Commission said that to get Scottish public finances in order that would mean a 4% squeeze over the next ten years. That’s going to feel to a lot of Scots like you vote for independence, you have another ten years of Scottish austerity.

NS: Well, just let me be clear about what the Scottish Growth Commission actually said. It said that a future Scottish government in an independent Scotland should explicitly and firmly reject the austerity approach that we’ve seen in the last few years. We should grow public expenditure in real terms. We should have fiscal rules but we should not become a prisoner of those fiscal rules. We should put growing the economy and growing public spending as part of that.

AM: But it did also talk about a 4% squeeze didn’t it?

NS: It talked about growing public spending explicitly. The other point I think that is really important here is you talk about Scotland’s fiscal position and how that is relative to the rest of the UK. That’s a feature of how we’re governed right now. It’s not a reflection of what life would be in an independent Scotland. Part of the argument for independence is to have the powers to grow our economy faster and more sustainable, to grow the wealth of
the country and to steward that wealth in the interests of everybody across the country.

AM: There's an old phrase. Why look in the crystal ball when you can read the history book? You've been in power for 11 years now, why is that after 11 years Scottish confidence and support for Scottish public services is at its lowest ever position?

NS: And still at a very, very high level.

AM: Low and going down at the moment.

NS: Public services across the whole of the UK have had a very difficult time because of austerity, largely imposed on Scotland by the UK government. Confidence in our health service for example, in education, remains at very, very high levels. But we recognise – as First Minister I recognise the big challenges – let's take the health service for example. We have rising demand because of changing demographics, so we are investing record sums in the health services, we have record numbers of people working the health service but we have to carry out difficult reforms as well.

AM: We talked about the health service last year.

NS: - but we have to carry out difficult reforms as well. Integration of health and social care. Shifting more resource into primary care. That's all underway in Scotland. I would argue it's further advanced in Scotland which is why we've got the best performing accident and emergency units of any part of the UK and that's been the case for almost four years running.

AM: We talked about A&E and targets this time last year. Since then how often have you hit those targets?

NS: We're not hitting targets consistently.

AM: 60 weeks in a row you failed to hit those targets.
NS: Well for example in the last couple of weeks we’ve hit one of our cancer targets for the first time in a couple of years which is good and positive. We’ve got another cancer target that we’re working hard to hit. Just after this parliamentary recess the new Health Secretary Jean Freeman will set out of a very clear and funded plan to sustainability reduce waiting times so that we are meeting all of our targets. So we’re doing the hard work that we need to do to make sure our fantastic health service continues to deliver.

AM: Confidence in Scottish schools has never been lower. Is that related to the £400 million cut you’ve made in schools budgets since you came to power?

NS: We’re putting extra money into schools so right now –
AM: After £400 million less.
NS: Well again we’ve suffered from austerity. Last year – and this is a sharp contrast against to other parts of the UK, local authority budgets and it’s local authorities that largely fund our schools, local authority – I heard you ask Brandon Lewis about cuts to local authorities. We’ve had a real terms increase in the revenue budgets in local authorities in the last year. We are putting what we are calling the People Equity Fund directly into schools in the hands of head teachers.
AM: But you’ve also – sorry to jump in –
NS: Teacher numbers are rising again.
AM: Well, after three and a half thousand fewer teachers over your time –
NS: Partly due to the austerity, cuts to the Scottish budget, but also teacher numbers will change depending on the numbers of peoples in our schools. But we’ve got more than 500 extra teachers in our schools. We’re putting more money into schools. These are difficult challenges, but we’re meeting these challenges head on.
AM: If it’s all down to UK-wide cuts and so on, why is it that in reading, maths and science, probably the three subjects most important to Scotland’s economic future, Scotland is way below England in the Pisa rankings?

NS: The Pisa rankings, which are important and the Pisa study you cite is already getting to be a bit out of date. We’ve been doing a lot of work. All of the evidence we have now is that not only are standards rising, and we look at that in terms of exam passes, the gap between the richest and poorest students is closing.

AM: But something has gone wrong hasn’t it?

NS: Well, we are working hard to make sure that it’s going right, and we will continue to do that. We’ve introduced standardised assessments in our schools now, which are opposed by all of the other parties, but we think that’s important, so that from the youngest age we know and have confidence that our children are doing well, so that if there are issues there we can intervene earlier.

AM: We’ve talked inevitably in very abstract terms, but there’s an anonymous teacher who wrote to you just this week and she said, ‘I’m not sure of the extent to which you’re aware of how bad things are. The Scottish government are not tackling the real underlying issues in education, they’re just putting a plaster over a gaping wound. We have a teaching crisis. I do not think the current help goes anywhere near far enough.’ What do you say her?

NS: Well, we’ll continue to talk to teachers and to work with teachers and with parents. We have not just a situation now where we’re putting more investment into schools and we have teacher numbers rising again, but we are also carrying out important reforms.

AM: She sounds pretty desperate.
NS: Look, I read that letter in full, not just the extract that you’ve read out there. So I know the issues that that teacher has raised. Some of them are around mainstream education where pupils with additional support needs are in mainstream schools rather than special schools. But we’re carrying out also important reforms of education, so giving head teachers more resources and also more power. So you know, we watch that. And the UK government seems to be paralysed by Brexit. We’re getting on with these challenges. All governments everywhere face these challenges right now. We’re getting on with them and finding the solutions, working with teachers and the health service, working with health professionals, to overcome the challenges that we face.

AM: You’ve had one huge distraction through all of this period, which is the position of Alex Salmond. You know him well, you keep your ear to the ground, had you heard any stories about him before it broke in the press?

NS: Well, this – absolutely not. Until, well, I’ve said previously Alex Salmond didn’t inform me about these complaints - in April that was the first I had known. But I would say two things. You will appreciate this is not me trying to dodge the answer, there are legal processes under way. I’m very limited in what I can say, which is frustrating, believe me. It’s very important, and I heard you talk earlier on about the situation in America with the Supreme Court confirmation – it’s important when complaints of this nature come forward they are properly investigated and that happens no matter how uncomfortable it is for people like me, what the identity or political affiliation of the person complained about is, that there is proper investigation and due process for all parties. And that’s what has to happen here.

AM: Would you welcome him back if he –

NS: I’m not – Alec is somebody that I have not just worked with, he’s been a friend of mine for a long time, but it would not be right for me to pre-empt both the civil legal situation –
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AM: I’m going to ask you one more thing, and you can give me the same answer. But he’s raised a lot of money in crowd funding to defend himself, £100,000, and Scottish Rape Crisis Centre have said this is inappropriate and sending the wrong message to women.

NS: Look, I do think it’s important that I agree Rape Crisis and other organisations that we must do nothing that makes it harder for women or anybody to come forward with these complaints. And I think there is a duty on all of us in how we respond to these things to make sure we’re not doing that.

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