AM: You came down quite a lot of seats, you lost a third of your MPs, you lost half a million votes in that election. Theresa May, before her voice went, did say the word ‘sorry’. Are you going to apologise to your party today?

NS: Well, look, I think the BBC probably needs a bit of a reality check. There was an opinion poll published in Scotland yesterday. The SNP is 17 points clear of our nearest rival. We’re polling at a higher level a year after the last Scottish election.

AN: Since the general election.

NS: When I became SNP leader, the SNP had six MPs in the House of Commons. We’ve got 35 MPs today. The 2015 election was an exceptional election, an exceptional result in the immediate aftermath of the independence referendum. But to have
NICOLA STURGEON

started with six MPs and to be sitting here now with 35 MPs, I would suggest to you –

AM: No apologies, no contrition for what happened?

NS: I regret every seat that we lost and we reflect very, very carefully on that. Of course we do. But the SNP is 17 points clear of our nearest rival. We are polling at a higher level a year on from the Scottish election last year than we were a year after our election wins in 2007 or 2011. The Tories, who you’ve just been hearing from, are back in third place in the Scottish polls. So, all in all the SNP’s in a very, very strong position. My job now as SNP leader, as First Minister of Scotland, is to make sure that that trust we have amongst the Scottish people is trust that we retain. That’s why just a few weeks ago I set out what I think was widely accepted as a very bold and radical programme for government for the next year, setting Scotland up for the challenges that we face over the next decade.
AM: We’ll come on to all of that, but I think it’s not a state secret that you and Theresa May don’t have a very easy relationship. That said, when you watched her speech in Manchester did you have a fellow feeling?
NS: Of course.
AM: I mean, it was a gutsy performance and very, very frightening to lose your voice in that way.
NS: Well, firstly, just in terms of my relationship with Theresa May, I think there’s many people who would probably say they don’t have the easiest relationship with Theresa May. My view is very clear...we disagree on a lot of things, but we have responsibility to the people we serve to try to have a working relationship, and I will try very hard to do that. I managed to do that with David Cameron, albeit we had big political differences. On Theresa May’s speech, I would defy any politician to have watched her speech and not feel a sense of sympathy and perhaps a sense of ‘but for the grace of God, there go I’. But I don’t think it
was the speech in itself that is the problem for Theresa May, and under different circumstances what happened in that speech would have been laughed off. The problem for Theresa May is that she is a very weak prime minister presiding over a deeply divided party. And if that was just a problem for the Conservative Party I wouldn’t be particularly bothered, but it’s a massive problem for the country at the moment and for the livelihoods and living standards of everybody in the country.

AM: There is one area where she feels triumphant and vindicated. You’ve seen her and Ruth Davidson holding each other’s hands up and saying, ‘we saved the union in 2017.’ That’s true isn’t it?
NS: Well, look, I think people watch the chaos that’s engulfing the UK right now and as people look ahead and see the damage that is likely to be done by this unfolding disaster that is not just Brexit but this incompetent, chaotic approach to Brexit
being presided over by Theresa May, and Scotland being taken down that path against our will, then the case for Scotland’s future being in Scotland’s hands and us being more in control of the decisions that shape our destiny, I think that case becomes greater and stronger by the day. And it’s a case I and the SNP will continue to make.

AM: Let’s talk about that. I remember very clearly at the beginning of the year we sat in Bute House and talked about this and you were absolutely crystal clear that if Scotland is kept out of the single market there will be a second independence referendum. And then you announced in March that was going to happen, and then the election came and it was reverse haggis, if I can put it that way.

NS: I’m not even sure what that is. You’ve been out of Scotland too long, to talk about reverse haggis.

AM: Scottish reverse ferret. But you changed direction. And you dropped that. What was it
about losing all those votes and those MPs that was not –

NS: My feeling in the general election campaign and in the run-up to that and the immediate aftermath of that was that people feel – and I think this is understandable – that there’s so much uncertainty now that making a firm decision about the timing of another referendum is premature. And that’s why what I said after the general election is I won’t give any further consideration to the timing until Brexit and the terms of Brexit become clearer. Till we’ve got a clearer line of sight about what all that means for Scotland. It doesn’t mean I will stop making the case for Scotland being independent. As I say, with the chaos that engulfs the UK now and Scotland being taken down a path that we didn’t want to go down, I think that case becomes every stronger.

AM: Isn’t the truth that people are ‘scunnered’ to use a Scots word with the whole subject at the moment, they’re fed up
to the back teeth with talking about independence, they don’t want to hear about it for a while, and you have heard that message?

NS: There are many people, I think, in Scotland who desperately want to see Scotland become independent. There are others who are not convinced and who will never be convinced and then others who perhaps just think we need a bit of dust to settle on Brexit. But there’s perhaps an element of people being a but ‘scunnered’ with big decisions. We had not just the independence referendum, but the Brexit vote, two general elections in the course of two years. So I understand that. My job is to make the case – because I think the damage that is likely to be done to Scotland – to the whole of the UK, to be frank about it, is likely to be monumental. I don’t want Scotland to have that imposed on it. I’ve also got a mandate to give people in Scotland a choice on this issue. But I will listen to what people say in terms of the timing of that. But let me
stress this point: that the case for decisions that shape our future, being in our own hands, not in the hands of this dysfunctional government in Westminster is probably stronger than it’s ever been.

AM: You have always been crystal clear that from your point of view, for the Scottish economy, you need to be inside the single market.
NS: Yeah.
AM: March 2019: that opportunity disappears.
NS: Well, I – that may be the case but I –
AM: My question is – sorry – is there a possibility of a second independence referendum before that final Rubicon is crossed?
NS: Well, I’ve said I will consider the timing again when we have more clarity about what we are facing in March 2019 than we do just now.
AM: So we could have a second referendum before we actually leave the EU?
NS: When I said I will not consider the timing until there is that greater clarity, towards the end of next year, it would I think contradict that if I was immediately to give, you know, the consideration that I said I will wait until that clarity emerges before doing. But let me say I believe so, so strongly, not for ideological reasons but for hard practical reasons that it would be an act of, you know, monumental folly for the UK to come out of the single market. I don’t think it should come out of the EU, but I respect the fact that that is what the government is going to do. But let’s stay in the single market and stay in the customs union because it’s in the overwhelming interest of our economy.
AM: That is not going to happen. You’re being shut out of these conversations.
NS: Can I say that that reflects badly on the UK government, not on the Scottish government.
AM: I’m not saying that. But you have been shut out. You can’t keep us inside the single market. March 2019, it will be over.

NS: Well, that may be true and we will all have to face up to the implications of that. But post the general election, my view is that we shouldn’t simply accept that these things are off the table any more. We all know what the arithmetic in the House of Commons is. I listened to Ruth Davidson saying she wishes we could stay in the single market and have the freest possible trade. Our MPs in the House of Commons could use their votes to swing the balance, and if they don’t do that, then I think Ruth Davidson will have some very tough questions to answer. So the arithmetic of the House of Commons, I think the mood across not just Scotland but the UK is such that we should continue to argue for commonsense here and not just accept that these battles can’t be won. I don’t accept that.
AM: If the leader of Catalonia announces independence next week will you recognise Catalonia as a free state?  
NS: What I think has to be recognised is the strength of feeling in Catalonia. I think it’s now time for a dialogue to replace confrontation. The scenes we saw last Sunday were unacceptable and should be condemned by everybody. But what now has to happen, in my view, is the Spanish government, which of course wants to uphold its constitution, and the Catalan government sitting down to find a way forward. One that complies with the rule of law but one that also respects democracy and the right of the people of Catalonia to choose their own future. And you cannot simply say that the right of a people to choose their own future is illegal in all circumstances.

AM: So just coming back to my original question, would you recognise Catalonia as an independent country, yes or no?
NS: We’d recognise the decisions and the statements that were made, but I’m not going to speculate here on what will happen in Catalonia before it happens. I’m not in control of that, it’s not for me to decide what is the right future for Catalonia. But everybody has to recognise the reality of the situation in Catalonia. But the question here is how is it resolved? My view is it shouldn’t be resolved by, you know, both sides going further to extreme positions. It should be resolved by both sides coming together to try to find a way forward in this that respects all of these principles: the rule of law, democracy and the right to choose.

AM: Was it a legitimate referendum, do you think?

NS: It was a referendum that lots of people voted in. Some – lots didn’t, but lots of people voted in. Spain maintains it was an illegal referendum. I understand that and that’s the position that the Spanish government takes. But the point I’m making
is if Spain’s position is that that wasn’t a legal referendum, surely the question is how can there be a legal way for people in Catalonia to express their view? Because you can’t simply in a democracy say there is no legal and legitimate way for people to decide what they want their future to be. That would be an absurd position. That’s why I think dialogue —

AM: Would you urge the Spanish to facilitate that, as it were, a different referendum?

NS: I think there’s a duty now on Spain and Catalonia to come together to have a discussion what is the way forward. It may be sensible to try to have some independent mediation of that, perhaps the European Union. Which I think should have condemned the violence that we saw last Sunday and unfortunately didn’t. But perhaps the EU not taking sides, but in the role of mediator, has a role to play. But dialogue has to replace confrontation here.
AM: Let’s turn to domestic policy. You set out eight targets for the NHS in Scotland. How many of them have you hit?

NS: Look, we’re not meeting all of the – well, let me say first of all we’re the best performing emergency departments in the whole of the UK.

AM: Okay, of the eight targets how many have you hit?

NS: We are not hitting as many as I want us to be hitting.

AM: Come on, you know the answer’s one out of the eight.

NS: Let me say. We know – and Scotland’s not unique here. We have rising demands on our health service because of the change in demographics of our country. Our NHS is in a transition phase as we try to reshape it so that more care is delivered in the community so that we build up primary and mental health and social care services, so we’re doing the hard work that’s required to deliver that. We’re the only government in the UK
that has properly integrated health and social care. We’re the only government in the UK that has taken concrete steps to build up elective capacity. We’ve put £3 billion more into the health services. There are 12,000 people more working in the health service and as I started out saying we’ve got the best performing emergency departments anywhere in the UK.

AM: If you have the misfortune to get cancer in Scotland the target was that treatment would start within two months. Two months is actually a long long time to wait for treatment if you’re in that horrible position - and you’re not hitting that target and the numbers are getting worse.

NS: We’ve got two waiting times targets. One that goes from the point of diagnosis through to treatment, and one is from the decision to treat to treatment. In terms of that latter one we are virtually meeting that target. In terms of the other one we’ve got some issues
around the speed of diagnostics. That’s why we’re investing more in diagnostics, we’re looking at new ways for health boards to deliver on that part of the waiting time, but the average waiting times, for both of those targets are well within those targets. And the vast majority of people in Scotland get very speedy access to cancer services.

AM: When it comes to a young person with mental health problems, again very, very vulnerable people and you have raised this yourself, it’s 18 weeks in terms of when they start the treatment and again you’ve missed that target.

NS: But we are progressing towards that and we are investing more in mental health. Again we have a situation here in - you know I don’t shy away from this, but in Scotland –

AM: It’s been ten years.
NS: But Scotland is not unique here. What we have in mental health and actually I think politicians should have the guts to say this is a good thing. We’re seeing reducing stigma around mental health so we have more people coming forward, and we’re building up, so we’ve vastly increased budgets in mental health. We’ve got more specialists working in our mental health services and we are seeing progress towards delivering these targets in a way that we didn’t see before. So I don’t shy away from any of this.

AM: Then there’s the overall target, if I may which is everybody could be seen in hospital within 20 weeks and again you’ve missed –
MS: That’s not the target actually.
AM: 12 weeks, beg your pardon and again you’ve missed that target too.

NS: But for the vast overwhelming majority of people that target is met. Now when I –
AM: 20%, it’s not met. 20% that’s a lot of people.
NS: When I was you know health secretary at first when the SNP first came to power, the targets were much longer and fewer people were being seen within them than is the case today. We’ve reduced the targets so we’ve made the pressure on ourselves and the system all the harder to meet and we’re actually doing better in terms of meeting those targets than previous governments were doing meeting longer waiting times targets. Now, there is a challenge in health services across the globe from the changing demographics. I would put to you now, would put to you very firmly –

AM: They need more money don’t they in the end? They need better funding.

NS: Since the SNP took office there is 3 billion more going into the health service than was the case. We have a commitment in this parliament and it was a stronger commitment than was given by any other party in the election to the Scottish
parliament last year for another £2 billion of investment over this parliament. We’re also doing something that is quite hard to do. We’re transferring resource from acute services into primary community and social care because we know that building up those services is the long-term solution to the challenges our health service face. So I would put to you we’re doing better on these challenges than any other government anywhere in the UK.

AM: But you set the targets and you –
NS: Absolutely and we’re rightly –
AM: And you’ve missed them and part of the story is funding. Whether it’s the NHS, whether it’s schools, you’ve been very critical of Tory austerity -
NS: Absolutely.
AM: ...but you’ve been very, very timid when it comes to actually raising taxes in Scotland. Are you going to raise taxes in Scotland?
NS: Well we – we’ll set our budget in the third week in December and we’ll set out our position on tax, but I’ve said very clearly that – let me just take you up on what you said a minute ago. We took a decision in our budget last year not to give a tax cut that was being given by the Tories to the top 10% of income earners. So we’ve taken different decisions to protect public services and that’s why I think whether it’s on housing, health, a range of other things, we are doing so much better than governments elsewhere in the UK.

AM: But you have these new powers and you don’t use them. You haven’t raised taxes on wealth or income.

NS: Andrew, Andrew with the greatest respect I’ve just sat here and told you how we did use them. You can’t then just say to me I don’t use them ‘cause I’ve just given you the example of how I did use them. And in this budget we said and again this is I
think showing an openness and a transparency and an ambition for the country that has not been seen in other governments in the UK that it is time to look at whether we responsively and progressively use our income tax powers more. And we’ll shortly set out a discussion paper with the options in that and take final decisions in our budget. But the important point here is that about a third of our revenue in Scotland comes from income tax. Two thirds of it are still determined out of our overall budget, is still determined by decisions taken at Westminster so we need to see –

AM: Obviously you have control over the third is the only point I make.

NS: Well yeah, but as the Fraser of Allander Institute said just a week or so ago, the big decisions taken at Westminster still determine how much we have to spend overall. That’s why I will never stop saying that austerity, this immoral self-defeating austerity that the Tories have pursued has to
end and I hope the Chancellor ends it in his budget.

AM: You’ll have seen perhaps, I don’t know if you have, John Major writing in today’s papers talking about the problems of Universal Credit, the way it’s been rolled out as being cruel and uncaring, and calling for a review. Do you back him on that?

NS: Yes. I think the Scottish Parliament voted for this just last week. The Tories voted against the proposition that there should be a pause in the roll out of Universal Credit. I’ve seen, you know, in Inverness for example, where Universal Credit has been rolled out early there are people falling into debt, into rent arrears, utter misery being caused to already quite vulnerable people because of a reform that has been shambolic in its implementation and I think it is cruel to press ahead with Universal Credit until that’s fixed.
AM; Can you explain to us clearly and reasonably quickly what your plan is for EU citizens in Scotland after Brexit?

NS: Well, it appears the UK government is going to make EU citizens apply for what they’re calling settled status and possibly charge a fee for that. They haven’t said what that fee would be but if it’s the same as it is for residency it will be around £65. We will pay that for workers in the public sector. Why? Because it helps individuals but it helps us keep vital workers in our NHS and public services and it sends a message to EU nationals that we want them to stay here because we welcome them.