Andrew Marr: Welcome, Minister. You think that no deal is now the likeliest outcome?
Karin Kneissl: Yes, I have said that a few weeks ago. That we have a number of indications that lead to this conclusion.

AM: And you’ve called it a dirty Brexit, what does a dirty Brexit mean?
KK: Well, I don’t recall now that attribute. But a hard Brexit, we call it, and this means that there will be a disorderly exit, as your colleague previously just called it, crashing out.

AM: And yet you say that the EU side at least should not be too worried about this, that you can prepare and you are preparing.
KK: Of course. What we call contingency planning under the heading of prepare for all kind of scenarios. This has been going on for the entire past year, and when I took office I was told that there should be a withdrawal agreement by mid-October in order to make sure that a ratification process, both in the UK and in the remaining 27, can be handled in a smooth way. We had the EU summit on Brexit on November 25th, we’re now in mid-February and we’re under time pressure, no doubt. Let me also remind us all of next Friday, Friday February 15th. This will be exactly six weeks before the day of exit and any ship that will leave a UK port next week has to know what kind of customs papers they will take along, because it could be that when arriving in the port of destination that either the UK will be out of the EU or still inside the EU because some sort of transition period could have been arranged. So the answer to this is not something that will happen in April, it’s something that is with us, that is with any
AM: Karin Kneissl, are you talking to the British government about no deal preparations at the moment – not you personally necessarily but the EU side and EU governments?
KK: Well, on behalf of the EU it’s Commissioner Michel Barnier who speaks for all of us, this is clear. But I of course have the occasion to exchange from time to time and I had the pleasure to see again my colleague Secretary Jeremy Hunt the past week in Bucharest when we had the EU Council on Foreign Affairs and we discussed it, and of course we have to be aware, not concentrating ourselves only on the relations EU-UK, it also means UK and third countries.

AM: But to be clear, you’re talking to Jeremy Hunt and others about the possibility of no deal and what happens then?
KK: Well, that we do, when we meet each other at Council meetings and the subsequent corridor talks, dinner, whatever. But when it comes to the very official lines, this is Commissioner Michel Barnier, he has both the mandate for the withdrawal agreement that he negotiated, that was submitted in November, and he now has a new mandate for the future relations between the UK and the EU. It’s he who talks for all of us.

AM: There seem to be two possible routes forward for a deal. One is what the prime minister, Theresa May, has been asking for, and the problem there is about the backstop. Can I ask, is it really worth the disruption of no deal to maintain the backstop without a British escape clause or without a time limit? Is the time limit and the escape clause so important to the European side that it’s worth a no deal?
KK: I think the important topic at stake is the peace agreement, the Good Friday Agreement. That is what we’re all talking about.
We’re not talking here about just the trade, just customs, we’re talking about peace in Northern Ireland.

AM: Alright, let’s look at the other possibility, which is Jeremy Corbyn has suggested this week that Britain could try and stay as a member of the customs union but also having some say on customs agreements. In your understanding, is that possible?
KK: This is to be decided exclusively among lawmakers in Westminster, it’s not up to me to interfere or to comment. One comment – there were several comments made by high-ranking Commission officials, and I would say any compromise is welcome that keeps us, all of us, afloat.

AM: But if the British said we want to stay in a customs union but we would like some say in trade deals, how would you respond?
KK: Well, we come back to the old term that we all keep employing, it’s no cherry picking. So remaining in the trade deals for the British, a customs union, as suggested by Jeremy Corbyn, again it’s an exclusively internal British topic and I will not further comment on that. But we have to know further details and the added value of the suggestion and the backing that it has among British lawmakers. Only then there will be a full-fledged response.

AM: And would it be cherry picking to have an escape clause from the backstop, in your view?
KK: I wouldn’t like to link cherry picking with the very important issue of Northern Ireland. It really has to do much more with the long list of trade agreements that we have and of course, as far as I have always understood, the British decision makers, it’s about not being subject to European Court decisions. This is something that has always been high on the agenda when it came to Brexit debates.

AM: Okay. Now, you have suggested that we’re quite close to running out of time for a deal, time is getting short, there’s a lot
still to do, how would Austria respond if Britain said we would like
to extend Article 50, we would like to postpone leaving for a while
to sort this out? What would your answer be?
KK: We would welcome anything. Again here, it’s up to Michel
Barnier. All the 27 will have to decide in a unanimous way to say
yes, let us extend, but we have to know for what kind of purpose.
We have to know the substance of the proposal made by the
British government and this is a unanimous decision to be taken
by 27 of us.

AM: So not no, but yes but. Let me ask you about one other thing
that’s caused huge offence in Britain, which is Donald Tusk’s
comments about Brexiteers having a special place in hell. This is a
human process, of course, and tempers are getting frayed, but it
caused real distress and was very, very unhelpful perhaps to the
EU side.
KK: Yes, that’s what Theresa May said. My personal reaction when
I read that was I don’t believe in a place called Hell, and what
comes to my mind is the famous quote by the late French
philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, ‘L’enfer, c’est les autres,’ Hell are
the others, and we’re exactly in that situation. We are in a
situation of frustration and everybody calls the others the hell
maker.
AM: I love it that we got to Jean Paul Sartre. Thank you very
much indeed for joining us, Minister.
(ends)