AM: How do you feel being kind of feted by the left green lobby?

MG: Well, I think that one of the things in politics is that you can’t always know who's going to react well or badly to what you announce or what you decide, you’ve just got to look at the evidence, make your mind up decide in your heart what you believe is right, and then take the consequences. And sometimes what I’ve argued for in education has inspired some pretty negative reactions. Some of it inspired some positive reaction. But you’ve just got to believe that if you follow the evidence and do the right thing, then ultimately the judge will be is the country in a better position?

AM: Well, let’s talk about doing the right thing in relation to one of the most important stories today, which is Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe. In a terrible condition in an Iranian prison. What was she doing when she went to Iran?

MG: I don’t know. One of the things I want to stress is that there is no reason why Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe should be in prison in Iran so far as any of us know. No evidence has been produced which suggests that she should be detained. We know that the Iranian regime is capable of abusing the human rights of its own citizens, it appears here to be harming the human rights of someone whose plight necessarily moves us all.

AM: You say that you don’t know what she was doing. Her husband is very clear that she was there on holiday with her child.

MG: Well, in that case I take exactly her husband’s assurance in that regard.
AM: So was she training journalists?

MG: Well, her husband said that she was there on holiday, and her husband is the person who should know. Her family are the people who should be in our thoughts at this time. But one of the things I just want to stress at the line of questioning which I know that you want to go down is that there is an effort somehow to shift attention and direction away from who is really at fault here, and it is the Iranian regime. They’re the people who jailed Nazanin, they’re the people upon whom our focus should light. There is no reason, no excuse and no justification for her detention and she should be released.

AM: And therefore it’s very, very important for our top diplomat, the representative of this country, the Foreign Secretary, to choose his words very carefully when it comes to this regime. Do you not think that it is time for Boris Johnson to formally change what he said. He’s apologised for the effect of it, he hasn’t changed what he said.

MG: Well, I think that there’s nothing the Iranian regime would like more than for the attention to be shifted off them and onto us. And I think we make a big mistake, Andrew, if we think that the right thing to do is to blame politicians in a democracy who are trying to do the right thing for the plight of a woman who is being imprisoned by a regime that is a serial abuser of human rights. Who’s in the dock here? Iran. It should be the actions of their judiciary and their revolutionary guard.

AM: With respect, that is not good enough. The Iranian judiciary are using Boris Johnson’s words to take her back to court and suggest that she will face another five years because of what Boris Johnson said. He is part of this story.
MG: If the Iranian judiciary want to use the words of a democrat in order to justify and unjustifiable decision, then it is our responsibility to call them out. Let’s not play their game. Let’s –

AM: He said that he thought she was training journalists, and that has been grabbed on by extremist members of the Iranian judiciary to put her plight into an even worse position. That is his fault, surely?

MG: Whatever we as democrats do or say extremists will choose to deploy for their own purposes, and we play their game if we point the finger at democrats who are trying to do the right thing when it’s extremists who are responsible for the abuse of human rights. And we should be firm and resolute in making it clear as a country across all political parties that it’s the Iranians who are responsible and in particular the Iranian judiciary and the revolutionary guards.

AM: Do you think Boris Johnson chose his words carefully?
MG: I think that you and others and all of us have a responsibility to think carefully about who’s really at fault here, and that is the Iranian regime.

AM: We can agree that they’re at fault. But we can also agree there is a problem here. Let me remind you what you said about Boris Johnson last year when you were sitting in that chair.

QUOTE:
‘I enjoyed working with Boris during the referendum campaign, I think he has great talents and great abilities. But you need something else to be prime minister. You need to have that grip, that executive authority, that sense of purpose, that clarity. I had hoped that Boris would show that, but in the end it wasn’t there.’
AM: Grip, authority, clarity, still very, very important if you’re Foreign Secretary. Can you really say that Boris Johnson has shown those things?

MG: Yes, I think Boris is doing a great job as Foreign Secretary. I also think that the attempt to shift the blame away from Iran and onto a democratically elected politician –

AM: I’m not trying to shift the blame away –

MG: No, you’re not, Andrew. And you’re fairly reflecting currents of opinion here in Westminster and elsewhere. But I think that it’s plain wrong for us to try to find fault with democrats when the real responsibility is to say to the Iranian regime, ‘you are a serial abuser of human rights, you’re the principal state sponsor of terrorism, you have blood on your hands in Syria, your responsibility is to ensure that this British citizen is at liberty.’ We play their game, we play into the extremists hands if we do anything other than show solidarity in the face of their abuse of human rights.

AM: It’s part of democracy when we point out democratic mistakes, I would argue.

MG: Sure.

AM: Can I suggest that Boris Johnson, if he can’t be sacked for this, is now a completely unsackable figure in this government?

MG: Well, the thing about every member of the government is that we are all there because the Prime Minister believes that we should be doing a particular job. No one is unsackable. We are all there in order to do our job. And I think Boris is doing a good job as Foreign Secretary and I think, critically, the countries that wish
our citizens, at the very least, no good, are countries that we should all stand up to collectively together.

AM: You’ve made up with him haven’t you?

MG: Well, I try to get on with –

AM: But you went for him quite publicly and quite famously and we had quite an exchange about that way back.

MG: We certainly did.

AM: We certainly did. And now you are allies again. There’s a memo repeated in the Mail on Sunday today where the two of you write to Theresa May, and in that memo you say, ‘we are profoundly worried that in some parts of government the current preparations are not proceeding with anything like sufficient energy.’ Can you explain exactly what you’re worried about?

MG: Well, I’ll say two things. The first thing is I’m not going to go into the detail of what may or may not have been said in private correspondence. I write letters –

AM: I’ve helpfully just spread it out.

MG: Well, you haven’t actually seen the original letter, so I’m not going to get into what is or is not in that letter, because the business of government, as you know, would grind to a halt if everything in every letter that I sent was then discussed on this show.

AM: Let’s put that to one side and just ask about the sentiment. Are you worried about the state of preparation for Brexit and possibly for no deal?
MG: Well, as a departmental minister I have a responsibility, perhaps a bigger responsibility than almost any other domestic minister, to make sure that we are ready for any eventuality. And I’m not worried, but I am determined to ensure that in my own department, which is the area for which I have responsibility, that we have everything in place for every eventuality. Now, what I want, what I believe the country wants, certainly what the Prime Minister and the Cabinet want, is to secure a good Brexit deal. And that’s what we’re working towards. We’re doing everything we can to secure that deal. But we’re also making sure that whatever may happen in these negotiations that Britain can make the best of them.

AM: You’ll have caught a little bit, I hope, of James Dyson talking there. A very inspiring figure in many ways. He says we should just walk away now.

MG: I can understand James’s point of view, but I on this occasion respectfully disagree with him. I think it is far better for us to be engaged in those negotiations. My Cabinet colleague David Davis, I think is doing a very good job in making sure that Britain’s interests, and indeed the wider interests of Europe are respected within this process.

AM: And in this process there is an expectation at the moment that Theresa May is going to have to go a little bit further when it comes to the money in order to open the trade deal talks properly. Would you block her if she tried to do that?

MG: I certainly would not. I think that –

AM: We have to spend a bit more.

MG: Well, no, I wouldn’t block the Prime Minister in doing what she believed was right. But we have to make sure that when
we’re negotiating on money or on anything else that we both respect Britain’s interests but also ensure, as the Prime Minister, has said, that no EU country is out of pocket as a result of the decisions that we’ve made. And the Prime Minister, in her speech in the Commons, I think spelt that out very effectively, and my view is the Prime Minister and David Davis should be given the flexibility they need in order to secure that good deal.

AM: Now, you know that in this programme we love to go back and trawl through quotes and try and find embarrassing quotes and put them to people. I’ve tried really, really hard and gone all the way through the referendum campaign to look for the quotes for Michael Gove which said, ‘by the way we’ll be paying 20 billion or 30 billion pounds just to get out of the thing.’ And I can’t find those quotes.

MG: Well, I think –

AM: Because you didn’t tell people did you?

MG: Well, during the course of the referendum campaign I was interviewed on lots of shows, including I think this one, and one of the points that I made is that at the end of this process we will have taken back control of our laws and of our monies. The critical thing about this negotiation is that we need to make sure that we pay a sum to cover our obligations, and then once we’ve paid that sum, as the Prime Minister has said, we won’t be paying any membership fee for the EU any more.

AM: So when Simon Stevens of the NHS says we need our 350 million quid a week, is he going to get it and if so, when is he going to get it do you think?

MG: Well, I think Simon Stevens made a good case for increased funding in the NHS and I’ve always supported increasing funding
in the NHS. I think that the sum mentioned, we’ve discussed in the past.

AM: You can say the sum mentioned.

MG: £350 million. That is the figure, the gross figure which the European Union controls every week. Now, once we’re out of the European Union obviously we can then decide how we spend that money. And I think, you know, as Jeremy Hunt said, I think, last week, I’d like to see a significant slice of that money, once we’ve left go to the NHS. But ultimately it’s for the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to decide.

AM: Let’s come to your own department now. You have announced a new body to oversee environmental protection after we leave the EU. In your article about it you come quite close to suggesting there are some things the EU has done rather well.

MG: Yes, I think it’s only fair to say that there are some things that have happened while we’ve been in the European Union that have been good. So if one looks at the EU’s record on the environment, there are balancing items. So on the Common Agricultural Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy I think it got things wrong. But the European Commission and some of the directives which it’s been responsible for enforcing have been good things. Now, some of those directives have been authored by British politicians. So for example, the habitats directive was actually the product of Boris Johnson’s father Stanley, and it’s been a good thing. A British politician working internationally in order to achieve something which has worked well for the whole world.

AM: And so you’re creating a new body, and again some people who supported Brexit might be a bit surprised, because they would think the point about Brexit is parliamentary sovereignty.
MICHAEL GOVE

Make parliament in charge of everything. And already, even before we’ve left, you are creating a new bureaucracy outside parliament. Why is it necessary?

MG: Well, I think that it’s a mistake to think that parliament should do everything. The whole point about democracy is that you have balance of institutions. And in the article that I’ve written in the Sunday Telegraph I’ve made the point that, as long as parliament, and in it will play an even more important role once we’ve left, it’s also the case that our judiciary will play an even more important role through judicial review, but that’s not enough. We do need to do further. And we do need to recognise that there are institutions at arms’ length from government, properly independent, that can play a role in making sure that citizens get the justice they deserve, and in particular the environment gets the protection it deserves.

AM: And you have said we’ll have better environmental protections after leaving the EU than we have now. But is there not a countervailing force, as Galbraith would have put it? Wilbur Ross, the American Trade Secretary has suggested that we have to change our regulatory regime to get the best kind of deal that we now need with the US, and that means lower standards in some areas, not higher.

MG: No. I’ve been clear and my colleague Liam Fox has been clear that while we do want a trade deal with the United States we won’t be lowering environmental or animal welfare standards. Free trade is a good thing, but free trade founders on the rocks if public opinion if people try to use it as a Trojan horse – if a Trojan horse can founder on the rocks – if people try to use it as a Trojan horse for lowering environmental protection. So we’re not going there.
AM: Alright. Can I ask about the kind of practical effect of all of this? What changes in the British countryside do you want to see after we leave the EU? How will things look different? Will we have better hedgerows, will we have more organic farming, what will happen to the woodlands, the forests? What is your picture of the British countryside after we leave?

MG: All of the above. What I’d like to see firstly is more trees, and we have a determination as a government to ensure that over the course of the next few years that we plant 11 million more trees in our country. We also want to see a growth in the sorts of habitats that encourage a wider range of species. I want to see the number of farmland birds increase. I want to see species which have been on the verge of extinction, and certainly endangered, return in healthy numbers. I also want us to help support farmers to produce food in a sustainable and productive way.

AM: Speaking of which – speaking of which, your colleague Christopher Grayling said that if we left after no deal one of the things we’d have to do is to grow some more food in this country. Presumably your department, because it’s a well-prepared department, is planning for that?

MG: Well, it’s not the case that the department grows its own food, but it’s certainly the case that British farmers are the best in the world. They are adaptable, ready to cope with different scenarios, it’s our job to help them. But the critical thing is that I expect that British food will actually be increasingly in demand worldwide. Because the trend overall globally is towards greater quality and British food is in the best position, British farmers are in the best position to meet that demand for the very highest quality.
AM: We’re running out of time. Can I ask you about something Sadiq Khan said? He said we need a new Clean Air Act in this country. You’re in charge of the quality of our air, and a new regime for diesel and petrol cars. Is that what you’d like to see from the budget?

MG: We need clear air action. I won’t get into the budget; it’s very close, the Chancellor would chew my ear off if I tried to speculate about what was going to be in it. But we’ve already announced steps to ensure, including bringing forward electric cars and getting rid of diesel cars on our roads by 2040. We’ve already announced steps. There will be more that we will announce. What we need is clean air action, not a Clean Air Act.

AM: You’ve said not on diesel cars off our roads by 2040 but petrol cars. In fact, virtually everything we think of at the moment as a car is going to go. When people are thinking about their next car should they now be thinking about buying electric?

MG: Well, I’d like to encourage people to buy if they can electric or hybrid. Of course the –

AM: Do you drive an electric car?

MG: I don’t at the moment, but I’m looking at a variety of them. My wife, who writes a – I won’t go into what my wife writes about, but she recently reviewed an electric car, and fantastic. I recognise what we need to do is to bring down the cost of electric cars, they’re not within everyone’s budget. The whole point of setting the legislative and the regulatory timetable that we have is to give people time to adjust.

(ends)