SC: We are trying to be helpful in terms of finding ways to introduce some new thinking into these negotiations so that we can get beyond where we are today, which is stuck, so that we can deal with really important issues with an Irish perspective. Like, for example, ensuring that there is no physical infrastructure on the Irish border and in our view if we can have a shared customs territory, through some kind of customs partnership, which is British government language, we think that that can be the basis of a negotiation and to find a way forward.

NR: So what is it you’re waiting for from British ministers?

SC: Well, certainly first of all it would be helpful if – if the British government actually had some consensus around this, this concept, as opposed to consensus around something else which people seem to think might work, using technology or some other way of creating as seamless a border as possible, but nevertheless border infrastructure. Let’s not forget what’s been agreed in these negotiations to date, because last December there was a clear agreement that the British Prime Minister signed up to that there would be no border infrastructure of any kind on the island of Ireland. And no related checks or controls. That means we’re not talking about cameras and scanning system and drones here. It means we’re talking about a political solution that allows for regulatory alignment in a way that prevents the need for border infrastructure.

NR: That would sound to many people like you’re merely restating the hope. Hope one we hope the UK doesn’t leave at all. Hope two we hope they stay in the single market. Hope three we hope they stay in the customs union. But the government are not doing any of those things.
SC: We’re not restating a hope. We expect that a clear commitment that was made by the British government in black and white in December, and repeated again in March, we are simply asking that that commitment be followed through on.

NR: But what I’m asking you is what more do you need? Is it practical details or do you really want a concession that maybe this can’t be done in the time available?

SC: I mean there are two different negotiations going on at the moment, and it’s important that people understand that. The first is to try to negotiate by the end of October a withdrawal treaty. In other words, the divorce arrangement between the European Union and the United Kingdom. And in that there’s a commitment that in order to address the Irish issues which are quite unique in terms of this Brexit challenge that there would be what’s called a backstop arrangement. In other words, a fall back insurance mechanism, to reassure people that there will be no infrastructure on the island of Ireland. And that is what is being negotiated at the moment in the context of the withdrawal treaty. Secondly then, there is a negotiation that’s started on the future relationship agreement, which in my view would probably go on for the next two years. So what we’re saying here is that we need to see by the end of June, we need to see some progress on how the Irish backstop, you know, dealing with the Irish border, is going to take shape.

NR: If the Brexiteers, as they’re often referred to, overrule Theresa May, if they say, look, forget a customs partnership, we don’t like it. Boris Johnson words, to ride in it. Do you then say as the Irish government will the EU then say game up, no more talking, you haven’t met your obligations, that’s the end of it?

SC: Well, look, you know, to be honest we don’t take our lead from Boris Johnson in relation to Brexit. We take our lead from
the Prime Minister. She has signed up to very clear commitments. She has written to Donald Tusk confirming those commitments. And I believe her, by the way. I believe she made those commitments in good faith and I believe she wants to follow through on them.

NR: What I’m asking you is the consequences if Theresa May cannot get the backing of her Cabinet for those words, what are the consequences as far as Ireland are concerned, as far as the EU is concerned, when it comes to that June summit? ..

SC: I – I think it’s going to be a very difficult summer for these negotiations if that happens. If we’re expecting to get thing concluded by the end of October is it unreasonable for the Irish government to ask for significant progress on a hugely important issue by the end of June? When – when it is actually factored into the EU negotiating guidelines that there would be a reassessment at the end of June of progress?

NR: It’s interesting –those guidelines, let me quote them back at you. The EU negotiating guidelines call for flexible and imaginative solutions.

SC: Correct.

NR: Where is Ireland’s flexibility? Where is your imagination? Where is your solution for dealing with this problem? It seems to me that what you’re saying to the British government, ‘you got us into this mess, you come up with a way of getting out of it.’

SC: Well, let’s talk about the Irish flexibility for a second. You know, in December when the British government wanted to move this process from phase one to phase two, it was Ireland who were unsure about that, because we hadn’t made progress on the Irish border issue. We agreed to allow the process to move
forward on the basis of a commitment from the British government that they would address comprehensively the Irish issue through a backstop or insurance mechanism. Again in March, when the negotiations were stuck and needed to move forward but were stuck again on an Irish border issue because a solution wasn’t taking shape, again we showed flexibility to allow the process of move on. Just let me finish. We allowed the process to move on, on the back of a commitment from the British Prime Minister that she accepted that within the withdrawal treaty there would be a legally operable backstop in that withdrawal treaty unless and until something else was – was negotiated.

NR: Now, you will have heard some people claim that the Irish government is in effect weaponising the border. David Trimble, the man who was at the heart of creating the Good Friday Agreement, said, ‘the Irish Prime Minister is endangering more than three decades of goodwill built up between London and Dublin.’ Is it responsible to suggest that any sort of border will bring back the bad old days?

SC: If you live on the island of Ireland, if you live in the border counties, if you talk to people about their memories of the past in the context of the border, you’ll often end up talking to somebody with tears in their eyes. This is not just a trading issue. This is about Ireland moving forward, communities and neighbours living together. It’s about the fact that, you know, 100,000 what are called store cattle, produced on small farms in the west of Ireland, cross the border to be finished on farms in Northern Ireland because there is no barrier. There’s normal movement, normal life, normal commerce, normal business. And that has reinforced the peace process over the last 20 years because of shared EU membership and because of the Good Friday Agreement structures. And what we are saying here is that we don’t want to undermine any of that.
NR: So does no hard border mean not a single camera at the border, no drones overhead?

SC: Well, I mean, look, we just simply think it won’t work, you know. And – and what I would say to people is look, you know, if you don’t believe me on it, you know, listen to people who are – who are living locally there. Listen to the Chief Constable of the PSNI, you know, he is saying that any infrastructure on the border, any physical infrastructure on the border is going to represent a risk to his officers. He’s warning not to go down that route. Listen to the – to the Brexit Committee in Westminster. They’ve said technology is not the solution to solving the Irish border issues. And we agree with that. And there are many other reports that say the same thing. You know, I would challenge you, show me a border somewhere in the world that – that – that is seamless. It doesn’t exist, is the answer. And that is why the only way we can find a solution here that means that we have a fully seamless border with no physical infrastructure or related checks and controls is to maintain alignment in terms of rules and regulations on both sides of that border.

NR: I hear your sincerity. But I also hear a man who wants to be seen to be flexible but sounds to me awfully like a man who’s saying let’s hope the British parliament votes for the customs union which we’ve always wanted, defies the government, and then we can do away with all these problems.

SC: But let me be very clear, I’m not flexible when it comes to border infrastructure. I’ve never been. The Irish government –

NR: This talk about being flexible on the customs partnership. Is it just that?

SC: No, no. As long as it achieves the outcome of there being no physical infrastructure on the island of Ireland and no related
checks or controls – and for both, by the way, the outcome can be delivered to create no new – new barriers between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom either. Because I understand that unionism is really concerned by that.

NR: All of that reminds me that I asked you whether you wanted parliament to defy ministers and vote for the customs union, which is Irish government policy, and you do, don’t you?

SC: Well, I think you know politics well enough to know that if an Irish government minister started to get involved in Westminster parliamentary votes I would be on very dangerous territory.

NR: You would but the smile I see on your face now would be on your face if parliament voted for a customs union.

SC: I will leave that. I will leave that. Look, we’ve said from the start that we believe if we had a shared customs space or shared customs territory, which would need to be negotiated, that would help to solve a lot of the issues that are stalling these negotiations right now.

NR: Simon Coveney, Tanaiste, thank you for talking to me.

SC: Thank you very much. Any time. Thank you.