NR: A word if you would about Tessa Jowell, Dame Tessa Jowell who died this morning.

KS: Yes, this is really sad news this morning. Tessa was a friend, she was actually a constituent, lived just up the road from me and there’s so many things that we remember her for. I think I’ll remember her – she came into parliament, into the Commons just three or four weeks ago. There was a debate about cancer and she was there in the under gallery and then we had a reception and Tessa being Tessa, went up to the podium just to say a few words about other people. She was struggling, she couldn’t really speak very well. But even in that moment, the last few weeks, you saw the Tessa we all know.

NR: Now turning now that interview with Simon Coveney, he is saying to the government your policy is not good enough, but he is effectively also saying to Labour, isn’t he, neither is your policy good enough to avoid a hard border.

KS: Well, I think we are in a farcical situation at the moment. Nearly two years after the referendum the Cabinet is fighting over two customs options, neither of which frankly are workable. Neither of which are acceptable to the EU and if either of which were put to the vote in parliament they probably wouldn’t carry a majority. What I heard at the end of that interview was your suggestion that the way out of this impasse is for it to be put to a vote in parliament. We want a vote on a customs union with the EU. A customs union. And that – an amendment to achieve that has been put down to the Trade Bill and the Customs Bill which finished their committee stage on the 1st of February this year and
the government won’t put that before us so that we can - That’s actually the way to resolve this impasse.

NR: I understand, perfectly reasonably you want to have a go at the government, the mess they’re in but I asked you about your policy and the reason I asked you about your policy is I put to you again, Labour’s policy would not be good enough to get rid of the fear of a hard border to get rid of the possibility of an Irish veto over the next stage of the Brexit negotiations, would it?

KS: I don’t accept that. It would. We have said a comprehensive customs union with the EU, that’s a necessary minimum. Nobody credible has suggested you can have no hard border in Northern Ireland –

NR: is this credible –

KS: Just let me finish.

NR: ‘You can’t sweep the customs union and the single market off the table,’ on the one hand and also say you don’t want a hard border in Northern Ireland. Is that a credible view?

KS: Yes, of course it is.

NR: Well they are your words in that chair and yet your policy is to oppose the single market?

KS: No, no, just let me finish this ’cause it is important I know. What we propose is a combination, on the one hand a comprehensive customs union, and nobody credible suggests you can achieve no hard border without it. And also, a strong single market relationship that hardwires the benefits of the single market into the future agreement. So we do have something very strong to say about the single market. We have our manifesto commitment about –

NR: You have a hope, you have a wish, you have an ambition, you have no deal on it.
KS: Well, our manifesto commitment was the benefits of the single market, they have to be hardwired into the future growth and that combination –

NR: A manifesto commitment – forgive me, Keir Starmer let put a question to you.

KS: That combination will deal with the Northern Ireland situation.

NR: A manifesto commitment which your own former party Leader in the House of Lords this week described as ‘a serious evasion of duty.’ Now as you know the House of Lords voted to support, with lots of Labour frontbenchers from the past, backing it. Membership of what’s called the European economic area, in effect staying in the single market. But it is the Labour Party’s policy to reject that.

KS: Well, it’s very important that we’re clear about what Labour Party policy is. Insofar as the Lords were really raising a concern that the government is sweeping the single market benefits off the table and hasn’t got a proposition, they’re right about that, we need to reflect on that. What the Lords then went on to do was to say the answer is the Norway model which is the EEA. So that everyone talked a very specific model. Now –

NR: Well how will you reflect on it?

KS: Well just let me finish. That has been forward so many times that I went to Norway for several days to look how the model worked and Norway is essentially very close to the single market but out of the customs union. It has infrastructure on the border with Sweden. So in my view that’s not the answer. But to the challenge does the agreement need to hardwire in the benefits of the single market, the answer from Labour is very clear. Yes, it does.

NR: Well the answer, forgive me, the answer is rather like ministers –
KS: And that case has to be alongside the customs union.
NR: - which is here’s a great long wish list of things we hope that Brussels would agree with that you have no evidence that they will. Michel Barnier said “the UK decision to leave the single market, Labour policy, and to leave the customs union would make border checks unavoidable.”

KS: Well look, the single market arrangements that we’re currently in are in the membership agreement and therefore we need a new agreement. We want an agreement that has the benefits of the single market in. We have gone way further than the government on this because we’ve said we recognised that means no drop off in standards, rights and protection, no new trade impediment, full access. So we’ve spelt out what it means. The argument that’s going on in the Labour Party really is not about should the benefits of the single market be hardwired in, we all agree on that. The question is how do we achieve that?

NR: Well you make out that everybody’s happy with this. David Milliband is flying in from the United States writing articles in the Mail on Sunday and appearing tomorrow ‘cause he doesn’t think it’s clear. Neil Kinnock doesn’t think it’s clear. Peter Mandelson doesn’t think it’s clear. The House of Lords don’t think it’s clear. It’s got so bad this failure of leadership on Europe the Duke of Wellington is making a stand which the Labour Party’s not willing to copy.

KS: Well look, we’ve been absolutely clear what the combination needs to be. I think for many months we’ve been talking past each other. Everybody I think accepts there’s going to have to be a new agreement, a UK/EU agreement. What goes in that agreement really matters. That’s why that manifesto commitment, that the benefits of both the customs union and the single market need to be in it, it is so important. And I accept we need to keep on saying it, we need to make sure it’s the combination customs
union and single market because we need that combination to deliver for trade and also deliver on the border in Northern Ireland, the solemn commitment that there shouldn’t be a hard border.

NR: Everyone accepts who I speak to in politics that you’re doing your best to bridge this big divide in your party. Remain voters on the one hand, Leave voters and so on. Just try finishing the following sentence for me. Brexit will be good for Britain because?

KS: Well, it’s very difficult for me to complete that sentence because I voted to remain and I wanted to remain.

NR: So why don’t you oppose it properly then?

KS: The Labour Party accepted that we put the referendum to the people. We got a result. Now it was a slim result. It was a narrow majority but the question that was answered was answered. But the only question that was answered was, should we leave or not.

TR: Well, front page of the Observer today is a call for another vote. How about that?

KS: The next question that comes along is, what’s the future relationship with the EU, what should it look like?

TR: Just a brief chance to respond. Student unions around the country are saying that they want another vote. Many supporters of Jeremy Corbyn, amongst the young in particular, saying they want another vote. It’s still possible Labour will come to that view, isn’t it?

KS: Well, the focus of our attention has been that there should be a meaningful vote in parliament. That will happen we hope in October, November. We’re trying to make that truly meaningful which is if we vote down that on the deal parliament decides what
happens next, because that’s what a meaningful vote should look like.

NR: Sir Keir Starmer, thank you very much for joining us.

Ends