NR: Before we talk about Brexit, let’s have a word about Dame Tessa Jowell, who died this morning. The Prime Minister has spoken of her dignity and courage in confronting her illness. She really did appeal across boundaries - this is not just people being polite is it?

MG: Oh completely. It’s incredibly sad news. Dame Tessa was one of the kindest and most thoughtful people you could find in public life. I remember as a young backbencher asking a question about my constituency when she was Culture Secretary, after the formal answer that she gave, she then sought me out behind the Speaker’s chair to see if there was anything more that she could do to help. And I also remember when I brought other issues, other problems to her, she couldn’t have been more determined to try to help me as a Conservative from the other side to do the right thing by the people whom I represented. And then I remember the immensely moving speech, which we saw a little bit of earlier in the news, that she gave in the House of Lords talking about cancer care. There were a number of my colleagues who were, you know, moved to tears by what she had to say. And I remember seeing her at dinner that night with her wonderful family, who will be missing her terribly. And the thing that struck me throughout is that she’s one of those people who brings joy into other people’s lives because she’s transparently – she was transparently there to try to do the right thing.

NR: Many more tributes to Tessa Jowell later in the day. Let’s turn to Brexit. The sort of issue that Tessa Jowell would have believed was incredibly important.

MG: Absolutely right.
NR: It is now 689 days since the referendum. I suspect you count each and every one of them off. Why has the government still not got a policy on our future trading relationship with the EU?

MG: Well, significant progress has been made in all sorts of areas of the negotiations with the EU. If you’ve been a member of a club for 40 years, if you’ve built up the ties and relationships that we have, then disentangling those in order to get all the benefits of Brexit necessarily take time. But as Simon Coveney, the Irish Deputy Foreign Minister, said earlier in this programme, we now have a situation where we have agreement on an implementation period in order to get some of the details absolutely right. We also have agreement that the rights of EU citizens and UK citizens will be respected. We have agreement on the amount that the UK will pay as we leave. And also, in a great article that the Prime Minister’s written in the Sunday Times today, we have agreement across the government that leaving the European Union will give us the opportunity to sign new trade deals so that we can take advantage of globalisation’s benefits, and also we will have the opportunity to take back control of our money and our laws.

NR: That’s a long-winded way, if you’ll forgive me, of saying all the things you have achieved. But 689 days since the referendum you are apparently no closer to the most central thing, which is what our future economic relationship with the EU should be. Now, you’ve on a Cabinet working group to deal with the so-called new customs partnership. Boris Johnson calls it crazy. Is he right?

MG: Well, you mentioned that I was long-winded. I think what I was trying to do was to emphasise that over the 600 or so days we have made progress in lots of areas.

NR: Is Boris Johnson right to call it crazy?
MG: You ask about Boris’s comments on the new customs partnership. In the interview Boris gave to the Daily Mail he pointed out some of the flaws of the new customs partnership, and across government, across Cabinet, there is agreement that neither of these two models is absolutely perfect. And with the new customs partnership Boris pointed out that because it’s novel, because no model like this exists, there have to be significant question marks over the deliverability of it on time. More than that, what the new customs partnership requires the British government to do is in effect to act as the tax collector and very possibly the effective delivery of regulation for the European Union. And the Prime Minister is very clear today that what we need to do is to take back control of our borders – and that means not just trade but of course, as the PM pointed out, control of immigration levels.

NR: I want to be clear then. It is the government’s view, is it your view, as someone on the committee, that this idea is crazy?

MG: It’s my view that the new customs partnership has flaws and that they need to be tested, and that the Prime Minister, quite rightly, has set up two groups, one on which I sit, to look at the new customs partnership, another one on which David Davis, Karen Bradley and Greg Clark will sit, in order to look at the other highly streamlined customs arrangements that everybody wants.

NR: Let’s be clear what your job is on this working group. Let’s be clear what your job is. (talking together)

MG: Well, our job is, as seven Ministers –

NR: I’ll ask the question, if it’s okay, and then you can answer it.

MG: Well, I was answering your earlier question.
NR: Is it your job to save the new customs partnership, dubbed crazy by Boris Johnson, or is it your job to bury it?

MG: It’s our job, as we do every day in government, Nick, to look at different policy options and to test them rigorously. One of the things about government is that whether we’re developing a new policy on air quality or a policy on customs, that the expertise of different government departments, the Ministers who lead them, the brilliant officials who work with us, is then brought to bear. And with a policy the opposition has put forward, whether it is the new customs partnership or an alternative, then naturally we want to make sure that it meets certain tests. And the Prime Minister laid out those tests very clearly in her article in the Sunday Times today. What we need to do is to make sure that we’re outside the customs union. That’s what people voted for, that was what was in our manifesto at the time of the last general election, and critically –

NR: .. take back control from the experts, what you said, Allie Robbins, who’s the Prime Minister’s key adviser –

MG: No, no, no, no.

NR: You’re taking back control, because he’s come up with a policy that’s crazy, it takes the like of you and Boris Johnson to make it not crazy?

MG: That’s so unfair to Ollie Robbins. And to the other colleagues.

NR: So Ollie Robbins, a man you support, staying in that job and think he’s doing a good job?

MG: I spent an hour with Ollie last week talking through all of these issues. It was an incredibly enjoyable and fascinating conversation.
NR: All those people who say he should be sacked, people who say his policies are crazy, you’re telling them to shut up?

MG: Yes. He’s a very able and genuinely public spirited civil servant who’s doing an excellent job. But the truth is that it’s always the case in government that you will have discussions between civil servants who will offer ideas and then Ministers who will test them robustly. So the use of the phrase, ‘take back control,’ which you deployed there with such wit and guile, the truth is that taking back control is what we voted to do as a country those 600-odd days ago, and what we’re seeking to do and what Ollie is helping us to do is to make sure that we have the policies that deliver for the British people.

NR: We’ll talk about the detail of the policy. Simon Coveney, the Irish Tanaiste, the deputy Prime Minister, in other words, said this will not work, the technology option that you have long backed. Do you think he’s bluffing?

MG: No, I think that he’s doing a very good job as a diplomat, as the Foreign Minister for his country, in putting across its case.

NR: But you think when he talks about the dangers to peace he could perhaps be overstating it?

MG: Well, I certainly won’t give someone who’s a very talented deputy Prime Minister advice on how to do their job. What I will say is that of course the Irish deputy Prime Minister, who’s their foreign spokesman, will naturally put the case for Ireland with fluency and with force. But these are the negotiations.

NR: Yeah, though some believe these arguments about peace and the border, it’s a kind of Trojan horse being used because Ireland
wants to persuade MPs to defeat your government and ensure that you stay in the customs union. Is it a Trojan horse?

MG: I think you’re putting words in the Irish deputy Prime Minister’s mouth.

NR: I’m reflecting back to you, what you said to a dinner of Brexiteers. You said the Irish were responsible for having a Trojan horse.

MG: Well, I would never be so – I hope I would never be so rude about any country. The truth is that the Irish deputy Prime Minister is making the case from Ireland’s point of view, but we’ve got a negotiation and there is give and take in the negotiation. As Simon Coveney pointed out, there’ve been occasions in the past when Ireland, having insisted on a particular proposition, then decided, actually do you know that? When push comes to shove we’ll show a bit of flexibility.

NR: So they’re right..

MG: Yes.

NR: Let’s move on to the issue of time. Some people say that time is the solution to some of these problems. That yes, the technological solution to the border isn’t ready now, give it three or four years. Are you one of those that think that might be the way forward?

MG: No. In delay there lies no plenty, as Shakespeare once said. One of the things that we need to do is to crack on. Now, I think that we have an implementation period that gives us an additional 21 months after we leave the European Union to get everything right.
NR: And not a month after that, on customs?

MG: I think the critical thing is to meet that deadline. And my experience in government reinforces my belief that we need to make sure that we deliver things at pace. And in my own area we’re doing everything we can in order to make sure that food and drink can cross borders without interruption, and that we do that – or the minimum of friction, I should say – and we do that in order to ensure that all the benefits of leaving the European Union - control over who comes here, control over trade deals, and also the money that we can take back and spend on our priorities like the NHS, we do all that in order to ensure those benefits can be delivered on day one after the implementation period.

NR: This could be a one word answer, if you wouldn’t mind. Just to be absolutely clear, those who say that the customs union should just be extended another few months, your own friend and colleague, Nick Bowles, you are saying no extension at all in any circumstances to deal with the customs problem, yes or no?

MG: Yes.

NR: Yes. There will not be an extension.

MG: Yes. That’s the difficulty of one word answers, when you ask questions that way. My view is I don’t believe in an extension.

NR: You don’t believe in extension. That is very clear. Do you believe that Brexit is, as one of the people who led the Leave campaign, would you say it’s working out as it was meant to?

MG: Yes, I think it is.

NR: Dan Hannan thinks it’s not working out and he is one of the most prominent supporters of Leave.
MG: Yes, and Dan is an incredibly articulate and thoughtful Member of the European Parliament, great friend of mine. But I take a slightly different view from Dan in this regard. I think that the Prime Minister is delivering exactly what the 17.4 million people voted for, exactly what was in our manifesto.

NR: Is it a shambles, this process?

MG: Oh absolutely not, no.

NR: Not a shambles, even though your friend, colleague, organiser of the Leave campaign, Dominic Cummings has described the whole Brexit process since the referendum as a shambles?

MG: He has a gift for vivid metaphor. My view, being in government, is that the Prime Minister has laid out a very, very clear flight path for us and that flight path is to ensure that when we leave the European Union that the money that we save can be spent on the NHS, that the trade deals that we can sign can make this country more prosperous, and critically, that we can control who comes here, so we can have an immigration policy that serves our interest economically but also allows us to continue to play a role as a humane beacon of freedom.

NR: Final question, and one word again. Should Brexiteers attacking the Prime Minister trust her?

MG: Yes.

NR: Michael Gove. One word answers. Thank you very much indeed.
(ends)