

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 13TH OCTOBER, NICOLA STURGEON, LEADER SNP

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A: We've been talking all morning about this potential new deal. 50-50 chance that there's hopes growing in Brussels and in Dublin that we are now finally in touching position of a deal. Would the SNP really vote that down and destroy it in the House of Commons?

NS: Well look, the proposals that are on the table from Boris Johnson and any likely amendment of them would not be acceptable to the SNP. They would take Scotland out of the EU, out of the single market, out of the customs union with all the damage that would do and against our will. And it's very clear that Boris Johnson envisages a much looser relationship in future with the EU than even Theresa May did. I mean you don't hear Boris Johnson talk about protecting environment rights or consumer rights or worker's rights, so we would be looking at a race to the bottom where priorities would be to try to get trade deals with the likes of Donald Trump. That's not acceptable to the SNP.

AM: At the moment the choice seems to be a deal or no deal and this is the deal.

NS: That's not the choice, Andrew.

AM: Well eventually it's going to be. There's either a deal or there isn't a deal.

NS: Well, we have to work through these things but if you fast forward to next weekend, that's not the choice. The Benn Act is the law of the land that says if there is no deal there has to be a request for an extension.

AM: So there will have to be a deal next year or whenever the Benn Act runs out. Eventually there will have to be a deal and it sounds like you're against any deal.

NS: Well I'm not sure I'm giving you an exclusive view by saying I'm against Brexit. Scotland voted against Brexit. So I don't think that is the choice now or even in the future. If there is an extension that opens the door to a General Election. It opens the door even to a second referendum. I don't think, and I certainly am not prepared as First Minister of Scotland to accept the inevitability of Brexit.

AM: Okay, well you said let's fast forward to Saturday. So let's fast forward to Saturday. I don't know if you heard Rebecca Long Bailey but she was suggesting that if a second referendum was attached to any possible deal by Boris Johnson that that might be an acceptable thing. If a referendum is part of this would the SNP then vote for it?

NS: Well look, I'm not going to speculate before we know what the actual choices will be next Saturday. We will not vote for a deal of the kind described by Boris Johnson. I set out, I think it was –

AM: ... referendum?

NS: Well, let me just try and unpack this and answer your question in detail and in all the different aspects of it. I think it was on this programme last year at the SNP conference I said the SNP would back a second EU referendum and that remains our position. But there is a question of the right and properly, and frankly, most deliverable sequence of events now. Over the past few weeks I have been of the view, and I'm still of the view, that the better sequence of events in principle and for practical reasons, is for the opposition to try to get rid of Boris Johnson in a vote of confidence. To have the extension secured and then have a General Election as quickly as possible. Now that remains my view. But I've always said we rule nothing out.

AM: You're open to –

NS: I'm open to anything.

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AM: - a so called people's vote, a vote on the floor of the House of Commons you'd be open to it in simply voting power?

NS: I've very deliberately tried not to close down options. This Brexit fiasco is in such a mess the implications and the consequences are so potentially damaging that I think any responsible leader wanting to do the right thing for the people they represent would keep all options open. But I've equally tried to have the SNP, tried to lead and to guide the best ways forward. One of the practical issues I think there is about having a referendum before a General Election, we've seen how difficult it has been, thus far impossible for the opposition to come together to unite behind a leader of an interim government that might be in office for a few days to secure an extension. If there is to be a government that legislates for a referendum it has to be in office for a reasonable period of time so it has to do other things. It has to govern, it might have to put through a budget. I just question whether –

AM: You don't see it happening?

NS: I question whether it would be possible for the opposition to come together, which is why I think an election – where parties can seek a mandate for a second referendum is the better option. But I'm ruling nothing out because the circumstances we're in is such that we have to keep our options open.

AM: That's interesting. Going ahead there are two possible outcomes. Outcome one. Boris Johnson either gets his deal through or brings us out without a deal at some point. I understand about the Benn Act but at some point?

NS: I don't think those are the only two options.

AM: Let's say option one is what he would regard and that part of the world would regard as a proper Brexit. We leave the EU, England certainly in its economy diverges in terms of regulations and in taxes. The SNP running Scotland would be in a very difficult position for a few years at least where you would be part of Brexit Britain. How would you cope with that?

NS: Well, firstly - and I don't want to overlabour this point, but I don't think the two options you've described are the only two options. The reason I am so determined to do everything I can to stop Brexit is because I think what you've just described there is damaging, not just for Scotland but for the rest of the UK.

AM: It may be damaging but is it plausible? I'm just looking at a plausible future, how do you deal with it?

NS: So to answer that question, I think Scotland in these circumstances the argument for Scotland becoming independent is even stronger than it has been previously. So that we can decide our own relationship with the European Union I would want us to be members of the European Union, continue to be in the single market and the customs union and actually have a better foundation to build economic success than we would have coming out of the EU and we see today a poll in the Sunday Times shows that support for independence is rising and people actually think that option, an independent Scotland in the EU, would lead to us being more prosperous than the alternative.

AM: Absolutely. As you work towards the referendum, fight the referendum campaign and then try to return to the EU as an independent country, that process takes quite a few years. In that period you would not be able to stop Britain diverging radically from where we are at the moment in terms of regulations and taxes and so on.

NS: Which is the real danger. Which is why a) I will fight so hard against the option and B) why I will make the case for Scotland not to allow itself to be trapped in that kind of situation, but instead to chart our own course as an independent country. I don't underestimate the dangers and the damage of a Boris Johnson led government in a race to the bottom prioritising trade deals with the likes of Donald Trump, which is why I would like to see a vote of confidence to get him out of office and a General Election that could hopefully see a different future.

AM: How long do you think it would take an independent Scotland to get back into the EU?

NS: Not very long. I'm not going to sit here and put a timescale on that because we would have to properly, responsibly in a mature way have these discussions, but I speak to people in the European institutions in other member states regularly as part of my job as First Minister. I think there is a real appetite to see Scotland in the EU. I think there would be open arms for Scotland and I don't think that is a process that would of necessity take a particularly long period of time. Of course there would be options for Scotland in the interim in terms of EFTA and being in the single market, so you know we have options there –

AM: Bit by bit, okay.

NS: - to put the interests of our country first. At the moment our future's being dictated to us by a Westminster Tory government that we didn't vote for.

AM: Scotland has a 7% deficit. One of the worst, if not the worst in Europe. Is that going to be a problem in those negotiations?

NS: Scotland's deficit is reducing. We saw in the most recent figures published our onshore revenues in particular are rising faster than other parts of the UK. Scotland's economy is sound, strong, healthy. The biggest risk to Scotland's economy right now is a Brexit future and you know, imagine an independent –

AM: Let me ask you about another thing directly related to that. If England leaves the EU and pursues a different course in terms of tax and regulations and so on which is the only reason for leaving the EU and therefore seems to be likely under the Conservatives, then you will have a very different regime south of the border and north of the border and I don't see how you could avoid a serious border.

NS: Well look, I don't want borders, it's not my choice.

AM: No, we know that.

NS: But again, we have to take these things step by step. I am not the author of the Brexit policy. I'm opposed to the Brexit policy. It is not my choice to have policies that result in borders. I don't want Scotland and I don't see why Scotland does have to choose –

AM: But you have to deal with a world that's foisted on you in a sense.

NS: And I will but what I'm not going to do is to try to speculate and answer questions on the basis of detail that we don't yet have and a scenario that we don't yet know the nature of. So I will always be frank and honest with people in Scotland about the choices I'm asking them to make. One of the things I am determined about is that the choice that Scotland will make on independence, just as it was in 2014 to be fair, will be an informed and a detailed one. We won't plaster lies on the side of a bus and cross our fingers and hope we get away with it.

AM: Will you be frank and honest if England leaves the EU and pursues a different course and Scotland stays inside the EU and wants to pursue that course, then there has to be a border between Scotland and England, that is kind of obvious. Let's be frank about it.

NS: That question and I understand why but that question had a number of ifs in it and that's the point I am making.

AM: Yes, agree.

NS: We need to see how things play out and what the final relationship between the UK and the EU will be. I am not of the view that what you've described what Boris Johnson wants is an inevitability and I will continue to argue against that. But as that picture clarifies I will be honest with the people of Scotland but that opens a situation where Scotland's best interests depend on being independent and in charge of our own future. And I don't want borders, it is not policies that are putting borders anywhere.

AM: So you need that new referendum. Why haven't you asked for a Section 30 Order?

NS: Because I'm putting legislation through the Scottish parliament right now to put the rules and regulations in place. I've said as recently as a few weeks ago that as that legislation progresses we will make that request for a Section 30 Order. We see rising support for independence –

AM: Can I ask you, will you be asking for that Order this year?

NS: Yes.

AM: You are asking for that Order next month?

NS: We will do it at an appropriate moment when the legislation is passing. It is likely to be over the next matter of weeks.

AM: So it's coming in quite soon?

NS: It is coming soon. Of course we don't yet know who is likely to be in Downing Street. The situation is very fluid and that's why I've taken the decision to do the preparations that are within our control here right now and we're getting on with that.

AM: So what quite a lot of your own supporters don't understand is because under this process a Conservative government could refuse to allow you to referendum, why don't you go for the so called plan B and say that if we win a big majority at the next election or we will carry out our own informal referendum, that will be enough. What's the problem?

NS: Because the process we undertake to choose our own future has to be capable of delivering independence. Now you know I've campaigned for independence all my life. If I thought there was a quicker way, an easier way, a plan B that would get us there quicker I would have taken it by now.

AM: So what is the problem?

NS: What we have to do is have a process that firstly allows us to demonstrate there is majority support in Scotland for independence, and secondly we have to have a process that is

legal and accepted, otherwise our independence will not be recognised. Now just the message in the UK –

AM: Do you think you'd get into a Catalan problem then?

NS: Well Catalonia, and our friends in Catalonia do demonstrate that you can have a referendum but not necessarily become independent. I'm in the business of seeing Scotland become independent. Now it would be easy for me and it would make my life easier in the short term just to tell my supporters what they want to hear, but I've watched Brexiteer leaders doing that over the past 3 years and it doesn't end well. I have to deal in reality. I'm determined to lead my country to independence and that means doing it properly.

AM: You've talked a lot about an election. Now in that election looking at the polls it's very hard to tell what's going to happen but one very very plausible scenario is that Labour is the largest party but doesn't have an overall majority and has to look to other parties in order to be able to govern. Now are you still in the position where you would not go into any kind of coalition with Labour?

NS: Yeah.

AM: So you do a supply and support. You might do a supply and support arrangement?

NS: We will not put the Tories into office. I don't favour coalitions. I'll say the same as I said in 2015 and 2017. We would favour a progressive type alliance. But I say this to Jeremy Corbyn or any Westminster leader who's looking to the SNP for support. If you don't accept Scotland's right to choose their own future at a time of our own choosing, don't even bother putting up the phone to me.

AM: Another referendum campaign therefore coming along. In an ideal world would it be better to have Alex Salmond shoulder to shoulder campaigning along with you?

NS: I want everybody who supports independence campaigning for independence. I think we're closer to it than ever before. I know what you're trying to do here. I'm not going to get drawn into the Alex Salmond situation –

AM: I'm not going to get involved in trials or anything like that. I'm just asking would it be better for the independence movement to have him there?

NS: I want everybody who supports independence campaigning hard for it and I believe we are as close – closer than we've ever been before to achieving that.

AM: If you are in the position of being able to support or not support a Jeremy Corbyn government, people are going to want to know what your attitude is to some of their more radical policies. The 10% coming from company accounts to their workers for instance. Scottish companies would have to be passing over 10% of their wealth to their own workers. It's a radical policy supported by a lot of people. What's the SNP's view?

NS; We'll just policies on their merit.

AM: What about that one?

NS: Well look, I will look at the detail but I have not seen all of the detail of these policies and I think we would want to judge that.

AM: I'm going to give you one more which is very easy to understand.

NS: Before you do Andrew, before you do, let me say I listened to Jeremy Corbyn at this recent conference and most of the policies he was proposing, abolishing prescription charges, abolishing tuition fees, free personal care for the elderly, the SNP has already done all of these things in Scotland so we're actually leading the way when it comes to progressive policies and Labour have clearly got a lot to learn.

AM; They want to squeeze out private schools from Britain entirely. You've got lots of private schools in Scotland, would you favour that?

NS: Again, we've already in terms of business rates exemptions, we're already removing that from private schools here, so again on some of these things we're ahead of the game. Now Labour's announced a lot of things in headline terms. I don't know what all the detail is. I've already said I don't envisage coalitions. In the kind of arrangement we're supporting anybody we'll look at the merit of policies and we will always act in what we think is in the best interests of the people of Scotland.

AM: One of your erstwhile supporters, Robin McAlpine of the think tank Common Weal has been very very critical of how you run things in Scotland. He says: "there's no meaningful cabinet government, internal dissent is not accepted and the administration has been built mainly around the personality of the leader. If you criticise you're out. Without a serious policy unit or proper links with Scottish public policy community the vacuum has been filled by the requests of lobbyists." That's a very serious and grave charge against your administration.

NS: Well it's also a big pile of nonsense, you know. I mean speak to anybody in my Cabinet, we have healthy, vibrant strong cabinet government in Scotland. I actually have a very strong policy unit. I set it up when I became First Minister. There wasn't a policy unit in the Scottish government before that we are introducing progressive, ground-breaking policies almost every week in Scotland right now and I've said you know, we've got a Labour leader south of the border that thinks his policies are so great that they form the backbone of their own manifesto. And you know after, what, nearly 13 years in government the SNP enjoys opinion poll leads and opinion polls are not everything over our opponents that most other parties would love to have. So you know, I appreciate that government is always about having people scrutinise and criticise and that's right, proper, it's in the nature of

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things but the SNP's in a pretty strong position and we're about to open our conference with a real spring in our steps.

Ends