ANDREW MARR SHOW, NICOLA STURGEON

Nicola Sturgeon, MSP
First Minister of Scotland

AM: Nicola Sturgeon, in that independent Scotland will children be able to read and write than they are now?

NS: Well, regardless of whether or not in the future Scotland becomes independent in Scotland right now we’re very much on improving standards in education. If we look at our education system we’ve expanded early years education, we have a new school curriculum in place which has been praised by the OECD, we have record numbers of young people leaving school with higher passes, advanced higher passes and going on into further education or training or employment. We have identified a particular issue with literacy and numeracy and we also are determined to accelerate the progress in closing the attainment gap. So we have a massive programme of reform under way right now to do that.

AM: Frankly on literacy your record is absolutely terrible. Your own government figures show that you have among 13 and 14 year-olds only less than half are now performing well in reading and writing and that’s gone down from 70% in just a few years under the SNP.

NS: First of all let me say I’ve been open that that’s not good enough, but just to put that into context we have a survey that measures pupils in the second year of secondary school but measures them against the standards that they are expected to achieve in the third year of secondary school and we have other information that show that by the time young people are in the third year more than 80% are reaching the required level. But we have, as I said, we’ve got a new curriculum in place, Curriculum for Excellence, it’s been praised by the OECD, but they’ve made
certain recommendations to us about how we improve the teaching of literacy and numeracy. So right now we’ve got a new national improvement framework. We have an attainment challenge, we have an attainment fund putting significant extra resources into education.

AM: Frameworks and challenges and fund. Do you know what is going wrong in Scottish schools?

NS: We have had some advice that the new curriculum is not focusing - the new Curriculum for Excellence which I’m sure you’re familiar with is about educating young people to be good citizens, to not just absorb facts and figures –

AM: But they need to be able to read and write as well.

NS: I’m coming on to accept that point. To encourage young people not just to absorb facts and figures but we able to analyse that and make sense of the world they live in. It’s the right thing to do. But we have had some advice that we need to have more of a focus within that curriculum on literacy and numeracy and that’s exactly what we’re doing right now. So we’ve introduced new bench marks for the teaching of literacy and numeracy and you know I’m interested in watching –

AM: Bench marks and all the rest of it, but under the SNP things have got worse and quite dramatically so.

NS: I would challenge that in terms of the general performance of education. I mean I look at the situation right now –

AM: On numeracy and literacy there’s no question that things have got worse.
MS: I’m not denying that in terms of literacy and numeracy and I’m telling you what we are doing to address that and you say well frame works and bench marks, I look at the debate in England just now about falling budgets in schools. We’ve just taken a decision to increase the budgets that schools have by £120 million money going direct to head teachers which is giving them the ability to invest in measures that they think will improve literacy and numeracy.

AM: Because you’re 700 teachers short at the moment in Scotland so you need to spend some money.

NS: Teaching recruitment is a challenge not just in Scotland but in many countries. That’s why right now we are increasing teacher intake, the General Teaching Council in Scotland is looking at different ways to bring different kinds of people into teaching. We’re trying to encourage retired teachers to come back into teaching. So I’m being very frank about it.

AM: You could pay them some more that might help.

NS: Well we have negotiations with teaching unions as is the case in England about the pay and conditions of teachers, that’s certainly one of the issues that we’ve always got to keep in mind. But we also need to be both frank about the challenges we’ve got in education – some of the challenges are not unique to Scotland, but we also have to recognise that the fundamentals of Scottish education in many respects are very strong and I repeat again, we now have record numbers of young people coming out of our schools with higher and advanced higher passes and going into what we call positive destinations. So, I’m focused on improving these areas that we need to improve but also making sure that we don’t do a disservice to teachers to pupils across the country by saying everything about Scottish education is bad, because emphatically it is not.
AM: All right, well let’s return to what you said, in the independence blueprint in 2013 about the OECD rankings, you said: “Scottish pupils outperform the OECD average in reading and science. The latest results show that we have halted a period of relative international decline since 2000.” Can you tell us what’s happened since then?

NS: We have seen that situation not as good as we want it to be. Look Andrew, I’m not going to sit here and deny that we have the PESA study. We also have what’s called SSLN, which was a study the latest version of which was published last week. I should say it’s a sample survey and it looks actually quite small numbers of pupils. One of the things we have done is introduced the National Improvement Framework -

AM: You didn’t challenge the PESA rankings when they were going well for you. You can hardly challenge them now they’re going so badly.

NS: I didn’t challenge them. I said I accepted them. But I know and I’ve said this many times before, I know how important a good education has been to me in my life. I want every young person in Scotland to have the best education. The vast majority of young people in Scotland do get the best of education, but there are areas where we need to do better and I am not shying away from that.

AM: And yet under the SNP something serious has gone wrong. Scotland used to be one of the most best educated countries in the world. And you have all the powers to change this and yet things are going backwards.
NS: Well, on literacy and numeracy we have a particular challenge, but on many other measures of Scottish education that is just not true. We are not going backwards.

AM: Literacy and numeracy are kind of important.

NS: Look, I think you’re trying to conduct this interview on the basis that I’m being defensive here. I’m not being defensive, I absolutely readily accept the areas where we need to do better. That’s why we have put such effort into the initiatives and the reforms that we are taking forward. And the point I was going to make earlier on which I didn’t get the chance to finish, is that we are actually introducing more transparency so that I can be held more to account so instead of sample surveys like the ones we’ve got, we will have information on every pupil in Scotland at the required levels broken down, not just by local authority but school by school so that there will be no hiding place for any politician on the performance of Scottish education.

AM: And you said not so long ago that you wanted to be judged by this and your neck will be on the line.
NS: Absolutely.
AM: You’re looking a little Mary Queen of Scots at the moment on that topic.

NS: I don’t wish to be Mary Queen of Scots. Look I’ve been First Minister for two and a half years and I said when I became First Minister that this was what I wanted to be the defining priority of however many years I am First Minister and I hold to that, so by the time that we’re at the next Scottish election I want to see improvement and – you’re know we’re talking about literacy and numeracy, the other big challenge we’ve got in Scotland which again is not unique to Scotland, is to close the attainment gap between the richest and the poorest young people and we’re very focused on –
AM: And you’re still behind England on that.

NS: Well on some measures and we don’t measure it in exactly the same way. You and I have had the discussion about university entrance before where the measurements are different in Scotland than England. But in a sense I’m not sitting here wanting to make those comparisons. I want Scotland to be the best on its own terms.

AM: Let’s move on to another aspect of domestic policy. Is it a scandal if nurses have to use food banks because of their low pay?

NS: Yes.
AM: That is happening in Scotland. According to the Scottish Royal College of Nursing spokespeople that is happening in Scotland and again you have the power as the Scottish Parliament to set public sector pay. You can raise taxes and you could pay Scottish nurses properly. Why don’t you?

NS: Well we have worked to tackle low pay. Let me set out what happens here with nurses pay and it’s the same in the rest of the UK as it is in Scotland. We have the independent Pay Review Body and it makes recommendations. The Scottish government, unlike the Westminster government, has always accepted those recommendations. We have had a period of pay restraint in the public sector because of our determination to protect jobs.

AM: They’ve lost 14% in terms of real value over the past period of time and you could correct this.

NS: We will continue to work through the Pay Review Body to make sure that nurses get the pay they deserve. I do accept that —
AM: But you opposed higher pay for nurses this week and the Royal College of Nursing is now talking about strike action.

NS: Let me just set it out, because we work through the Pay Review Body, we have agreed with the unions that we’re going to jointly commission some research, but there’s another important point here. Because of the action we’ve taken in Scotland on low pay and because of the commitment we gave that nurses would always get their entitlement to progression, a newly qualified nurse in Scotland is paid £300 more than a newly qualified nurse in England. Somebody at the bottom level of the agenda for change it’s much more than that. We’ve also protected the nurse bursary and we’re not asking nurse students to pay tuition fees. So it’s tough for nurses out there but we have done far more than any other government in the UK to try to protect the pay of nurses.

AM: Okay. You have said that independence it at the heart of this choice and you’ve talked a lot about material changes and that you watch the way public opinion is going in Scotland. If the Conservatives move ahead and you fall back in this election, is that not a material change?

NS: Well let’s wait and see who wins the election in Scotland.

AM: I put an If at the start of that.

NS: Well can I just set out my position here cos it is important. For me this is a question of at the end of the Brexit process does Scotland get a choice about our future? You know the position of the Tories and Labour UK wide is no matter how badly the Brexit negotiations go people should just have to like it or lump it. I don’t think that’s right. So at the end of the Brexit process I believe people in Scotland should have a choice about their own future. But there’s a more immediate priority in this election.
AM: After we’ve left or before we’ve left, sorry?

NS: At the end of the process, so that when the terms of Brexit are clear and people can compare that with the terms and the implications of independence, but the point I was going to make is in this election there’s actually a more immediate priority and opportunity for Scotland that is about making sure our voice is heard in the Brexit negotiations. This is an important point because there is a lot of concern even among some people who voted Leave that we are headed down the road of a very extreme Brexit. Now the Scottish government previously published proposals that would have accepted over leaving the EU but would have protected our place in the single market. The Prime Minister dismissed those proposals out of hand. This election actually –

AM: Well she thought it was impractical and impossible to actually run.

NS: Well she didn’t look at them seriously. So this election actually gives the Scottish people the chance to give real democratic legitimacy to those proposals. So my message in this election on Brexit is whether you voted Leave or Remain, whether you were yes or no in 2014, if you vote SNP you’re strengthening my hand to make sure that Scotland voice is heard in these negotiations and that we don’t sacrifice jobs and our economy. We can press the case for Scotland’s place in the single market.

AM: A lot of SNP voters voted to leave the EU.

NS: Absolutely.

AM: You have always said in the past that Scotland must be a full member of the EU after independence. And it’s been suggested by some people that you may move to say actually EFTA would be all right. Is that the case?
NS: Well if Scotland is independent our position – our position always has been as long as I’ve been in the SNP and continues to be that we want Scotland to be a fully member of the European Union. What we did towards the end –

AM: Including the Euro?

NS: We don’t want to go into the Euro and no member of the EU can be forced into the Euro and Sweden is one of the examples of that. But what we did at the end of last year was recognise that you know some people voted Remain, a majority in Scotland voted Remain, some voted Leave, Scotland voted differently to England, so we tried to see if there was compromise ground and we put forward proposals that would have accepted we were leaving the EU, as part of the UK, but try to protect our single market membership.

AN: Can I just ask you very briefly, yes or no I’m afraid, would independent Scottish membership of EFTA be an acceptable compromise in these circumstances – yes or no?

NS: My position is I want Scotland to be in the EU. Now we have to set out if we’re in an independence referendum and we’re not in that right now, the process for regaining or retaining, depending on where we are in the Brexit process, EU membership. Now it may be that we have a phased approach to that by necessity and –

AM: EFTA first, EU later kind of thing?

NS: Well it may be by necessity if we didn’t want that was now - we have to set that out at the time because there are still some uncertainties, many uncertainties around the Brexit process. But in this election if we want to have a chance of protecting our place in
the single market on which 80 thousand Scottish jobs depend, than vote SNP to strengthen our hand to try to do that.

AM: you got the line out at the end there. Nicola Sturgeon, thanks for joining us in the studio in London.