THE ANDREW MARR SHOW

INTERVIEW:

ALISTAIR DARLING, MP

BETTER TOGETHER CAMPAIGN

SEPTEMBER 14th 2014

ANDREW MARR:

Now earlier we heard from Alex Salmond. Now for the other side, here is Alistair Darling. Welcome. Not that long ago, you were kind of twenty points ahead. What has gone wrong?

ALISTAIR DARLING:

I said a year ago, as I think you did too, that this race would narrow as we got towards the wire, and that’s precisely what has happened. It’s not surprising; it’s the biggest single decision that we will ever take. If we vote to leave the UK on Thursday then there’s no going back. It’s not like an election where you can change your mind if things don’t work out. If things go wrong this time, you know we’ve already voted – we’re leaving, there is no way back - which is why in the next five days, we will be targeting about the 500,000 or so voters who’ve still got to make their minds up because the decision’s that critical.

ANDREW MARR:

We heard on the show this time last week from George Osborne and then from Gordon Brown that there were going to be radical new plans for extra devolution including fiscal powers and new monetary powers and job creating powers for the
Scottish Parliament. When are we actually going to see that? Are we going to see it before the vote?

ALISTAIR DARLING:
Well what is clear is that if we say no to the risks of independence, if we stay in the UK, you will get a stronger Scottish Parliament which will have not … It has control over health just now, but with the new tax powers if it wants to spend more money on health then it can do that. And the difference is you know that it’s quite a clear choice now. We can have faster, safer and better change, reform so that we can strengthen the health service, we can safeguard jobs, but you don’t have the risks that come with independence to jobs, to the funding of pensions and the health service, the uncertainty about currency.

ANDREW MARR:
Forgive me, Mr Osborne suggested the parties had done a deal and we would see the details. Is there a deal done? Will we see any details before the vote or not?

ALISTAIR DARLING:
What has been agreed is the timetable that will bring together the proposals made by the three non-nationalist parties. Now that’s abundantly clear that we will be able to start that process on Friday if we vote to stay in the United Kingdom. And I think the majority of people in Scotland actually want to see that we can have the best of both worlds with a strong Scottish Parliament - so that we can safeguard the funding for the health service, for example, which you were mentioning earlier. But at the same time we also get the jobs that come from us being part of the UK - there’s about a million jobs here in Scotland depend on us being part of the UK. You have certainty about the money we’ll be using. We have certainty over the funding of the health service and pensions.

ANDREW MARR:
It sounds to me that there isn’t a deal between the three union parties at the moment.

ALISTAIR DARLING:
But the agreement was set out earlier this week.
ANDREW MARR:
Well the Labour Party’s had very, very different views, for instance, on the Scottish Parliament’s future tax raising powers and its fiscal autonomy – to the Tories and the Liberal Democrats. Are those kind of essential basic details sorted?

ALISTAIR DARLING:
(over) Well actually the difference … there are differences. But what happened before 1997 when the then Labour Government legislated to set up the Scottish Parliament, and indeed two or three years ago with the latest reforms which are already coming through in relation to borrowing, stamp duty and so on, the parties came together. I mean the only party that was always absent from these discussions were the Nationalists who never wanted anything to do with it. But what I …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Some people will say, listening to this, it’s like what you accused the Nationalists of doing: basically cross your fingers and hope there’s going to be a deal.

ALISTAIR DARLING:
There will be because the differences between the three parties are very small. But what does concern me is that five days before most of us go to the polling station, we still don’t know answers to basic questions. In the last week with you know …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) On both sides now perhaps?

ALISTAIR DARLING:
Well I think there is absolute clarity as far as strengthening the Scottish Parliament is concerned and the certainty that that can bring. Change there is locked in. But we still don’t know how we can ensure that we don’t lose jobs, you know, with firms saying they’re going to take their headquarters out of Scotland. That would be a disaster for Scotland. We still don’t know how you’re going to replace the additional funding we get for the National Health Service. We don’t know who’s going to pay pensions. And you were asking …
ANDREW MARR:
Okay …

ALISTAIR DARLING:
… you were asking Alex Salmond a few moments ago about currency and he seemed to be doing a rather premature victory lap even before most of us have voted. But he was just simply asserting that lo and behold on Friday morning everybody else is wrong; they’re all going to fall into line with what he’s going to say. There’ll be years of wrangling never mind here but in Europe as well.

ANDREW MARR:
If there is a Yes vote, it’s essential for the Scottish economy that there is a deal on the currency very quickly, otherwise capital will just flood out of Scotland in a torrent. And therefore …

ALISTAIR DARLING:
(over) Well that is a very real risk.

ANDREW MARR:
… and therefore the point he makes that this must be done quickly is the real one, isn’t it?

ALISTAIR DARLING:
Yes but the real problem though is it is neither in the interest of Scotland to have a currency union because, as you were saying earlier, it means actually your economic policy would be decided in London – it’s what happens in the Eurozone with their currency union now – and for the rest of the UK, they’d have to underwrite our banking system without being able to regulate it. To suggest, as he did, that everybody else is wrong and, don’t worry, on Friday morning it’ll all be different, let alone Europe where you’ve got 28 other member states who can veto whatever you’re doing. He said he had legal advice. Well he said that before and it turned out not to be true. What concerns me as somebody who lives in Scotland is I don’t want to see my country subjected to years of uncertainty with all the risks. And we saw a bit of that last week.
ANDREW MARR:
(over) Okay this is …

ALISTAIR DARLING:
I don’t want to see that in the future where you don’t need to have it because we can have the change that we want within the framework of the United Kingdom – a stronger Scottish Parliament and safeguarding our pensions, our health service as well as jobs.

ANDREW MARR:
Here’s the strange thing. This is what the Yes campaign call scaremongering. What we haven’t had over the last year or so is a really passionate defence of Britain – what Britain was for, the Britain that people fought for, the achievements of Britain. There hasn’t been any passion on the No side.

ALISTAIR DARLING:
Well I don’t accept that because of course …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Much less passion.

ALISTAIR DARLING:
… of course our history … We helped build the United Kingdom. It wasn’t imposed upon us. Scotland had actually had far more influence than the rest of the United Kingdom than you might … than anyone could possibly imagine. It’s a huge thing that we’ve achieved. What we’ve achieved together in peacetime, in wartime - the Welfare State, the National Health Service – there are massive things to be proud of. But in this referendum of course we look forward and the world does move on, but I believe that most people in Scotland do want to see a stronger Scottish Parliament with control over key things like health, education, law and order, whatever …

ANDREW MARR:
But you can’t tell us exactly what those powers will be?
ALISTAIR DARLING:

We … The differences between the non-nationalist parties are so small that I don’t think there’s any doubt that we will not only have the power to raise taxes, but if people want to spend more money on the health service or on education in the Scottish Parliament, they can do that. But what … (Marr tries to interject) … what you avoid though, what you avoid though are the risks that will undoubtedly come from all this uncertainty, all these unanswered questions. And it’s remarkable five days before we go to the polls we simply do not know the answer to fundamental questions, fundamental questions on jobs, pensions and health service, currency, prices. We just don’t know.

ANDREW MARR:

Let me ask about your party because if you lose this vote 2015 may be the last time ever that a Labour Government can be elected in London. Now there’s been moves to delay that election until 2017 or so after these negotiations have been completed. What’s your view on that?

ALISTAIR DARLING:

Well, look, I don’t think there’s any argument whatsoever for extending the lifetime of this parliament. It’s on for five years. And remember, there’s lots of people watching this programme who don’t live in Scotland who’d rather like to get rid of the present government, so the General Election will go ahead next May. But, you know, we’re rather jumping the gun here you know rather like Alex Salmond was you know in his interview earlier on. The people in Scotland have yet to cast their votes. We’ve yet to reach this verdict. I think we will win on Thursday because …

ANDREW MARR:

Do you?

ALISTAIR DARLING:

I do, yes. I do think we will win …
ANDREW MARR:

(over) Why, because I mean the momentum seems to be on the other side at the moment?

ALISTAIR DARLING:

Look … Well, look, the polls, as you know, take them with a pinch of salt …

ANDREW MARR:

(over) Of course.

ALISTAIR DARLING:

… but actually you know there have been two or three today that suggest that you know things may be swinging back. But I said before this is going to go down to the wire, but I think we will win because I don’t think Scotland is going to get bullied into accepting something that it doesn’t want. You know, very often when you listen to Alex Salmond talking, it’s almost like a contest between us and the rest of the UK. It isn’t. Increasingly it looks like Salmond versus Scotland and, I’ll tell you what, Scotland’s going to win.

ANDREW MARR:

But if you win this time round by 10,000 votes or 0.1 per cent or 1 per cent, this is going to come back. Scotland is on a process which started in 1979 in modern times and will move on to full independence sooner or later surely?

ALISTAIR DARLING:

No I don’t accept that because I think that well, you know, Nationalism ebbs and flows. I think the majority of people in Scotland, fiercely proud of their country and what it’s achieved, what it can do in the future, say yes we can do a lot here but it actually suits us to work with our next door neighbours rather than to turn our next door neighbours into competitors. So I don’t … I don’t accept that. The one point that I do actually agree with Alex Salmond is that I think on Thursday we’ve got to decide this for a generation. I don’t know of anybody who actually wants to go through another two and a half year referendum.
ANDREW MARR:
But we’ve had a process whereby ‘79 there was a referendum but no parliament at all; ‘97, referendum for a parliament with some tax raising powers and so forth - tax varying powers, I should say; and since then that parliament has achieved more powers and now we have the referendum for full independence. This seems to a lot of people like an ineluctable process.

ALISTAIR DARLING:
There is a world of difference though between a Scottish Parliament within the United Kingdom in which we’re all equal partners and making a complete break where you turn the rest of the UK, the other people living on this island, into people living in foreign countries. There’s a world of difference between the two. And you know slowly but surely if we did that, the differences would you know develop so that our relationship was the same with the rest of the UK as it is to France or Germany or anything like that. I don’t think people want to see that. I passionately believe that in Scotland we can be proud of what we do, proud of what we can do in the future and for generations to come, but we can do that best by remaining in, you know, part of the United Kingdom with our friends, relations, our next door neighbours.

ANDREW MARR:
It’s been a vigorous and lively campaign, but writing in The Sunday Times you say it’s also been a dark and at times rather menacing campaign. Tell me a little bit about that. Have you felt menaced?

ALISTAIR DARLING:
Yeah. Look in the la…

ANDREW MARR:
In what way, sorry?

ALISTAIR DARLING:
Well I have been involved in political campaigning for about 35 years and I have never seen anything like this before. Normally you know people can stand on street stalls and you know the different parties will you know smile at each other and get on
and talk to the electorate. This isn’t happening. I was somewhere yesterday where you know I was being shouted down simply for being there. Now … And when you look at what’s been going on the internet. I think the majority of people in Scotland, they don’t want this. We are not prepared …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Has this affected your sort of ordinary daily life?

ALISTAIR DARLING:
No because you know I chose to take part in this campaign. But I think the majority of people, the quiet majority who are beginning to speak out, are not prepared to be bullied into accepting that there’s only … there’s only one side here. Both of us should be entitled to set out our views with passion, with vigour, but you know I just find …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) But there’s overexcitable people on both sides of the argument. Are you saying that this is coming somehow from the top or the centre of the Yes campaign?

ALISTAIR DARLING:
You’re right that there have been instances on both sides, but I’ve been very clear: anybody who steps over a line that is unacceptable has to be dealt with immediately because in the last five days of this campaign Scotland deserves …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) And you’re saying the other lot don’t?

ALISTAIR DARLING:
Well there have been times when things have been going … things have been said on the internet, things have been happening you know on the street and so on. I think we just don’t want that. What I would like to do though in the next five days is to concentrate increasingly on the choice that we now have. As I say, we have the opportunity to have a strong Scottish Parliament, look after our health service, but we don’t need … You know you can actually make Scotland stronger rather than make us
weaker by walking out with all the risks, all the damage that’s going to be done, and not just for my generation but for the people who come after.

ANDREW MARR:
Just before we end, I must ask you about the overnight news and Mr Haines and your reaction to that.

ALISTAIR DARLING:
It’s appalling news. It really is terrible. You know David Haines was simply trying to help people in dreadful conditions and it is inexcusable. It is you know a barbaric act. I think though it will strengthen the resolve of the international community, but today I think all our thoughts, my thoughts must be with David Haines’ family, and I’m sure the whole world will be offering their condolences to them.

ANDREW MARR:
Alistair Darling, thank you very much.

INTERVIEW ENDS