Nicola Sturgeon MSP
First Minister of Scotland

AM: The Scottish government, unlike Northern Ireland’s Democratic Unionists want to stay inside a European customs union and single market. The SNP points out that the word ‘Scotland,’ doesn’t appear once in the UK’s negotiated agreement with the EU and in response there have been growing calls in Scotland for a quick independence referendum there. Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, joins us from Glasgow. Welcome Nicola Sturgeon. Can I ask you first of all in today’s paper Tory MPs gaming what might happen next in the House of Commons. Include a scenario where the SNP’s block of MPs abstains on the Withdrawal Agreement vote. Is that going to happen?

NS: No. As things stand just now the SNP MPs will vote against what is being put before the House of Commons and let me set out very clearly why, but also set out clearly what I think should happen now. The Withdrawal Agreement, and I’ve ploughed through all 500 plus pages of it, has lots of flaws within it. But more fundamentally there is no clarity whatsoever about the future relationship between the UK and the EU. So the House of Commons is going to be asked to effectively endorse a blindfold Brexit, where all the difficult issues that have dogged these negotiations for two and a half years, are simply kicked further down the road. I think it would be a mistake and deeply irresponsible for the House of Commons to endorse that. But it’s not enough for people to say what they reject. There’s now also a need for calm heads and clear thinking and for those who reject this deal to come forward with the alternatives, and I think there are two ways forward. They’re not mutually exclusive. Firstly for the House of Commons to coalesce around a clear direction of travel that would keep the UK within the single market, and the
customs union, and also the option of another vote. Because whatever people voted for in 2016 they did not vote for the chaos that is prevailing now. And I hope to be in London later this week and I think it is incumbent on opposition parties to come together to look at a clear alternative that is in the interests of people the length and breadth of the UK.

AM: Well I want to look at those alternatives closely in a moment, but before I do just let me ask a little bit about the deal you say is no good for Scotland, because it includes – and I’m quoting from it: “A free trade area combining deep regulatory and customs cooperation going ahead. Zero tariffs, no fees or charges, no restrictions across goods sectors.” A lot of what is in this is exactly what the SNP wants, isn’t it?

NS: Well, no. We want us to unequivocally remain within the single market and the customs union and nothing in the Withdrawal Agreement or in the sketchy seven pages of the future relationship commits to that. That’s one of the strategic mistakes I think the Prime Minister is making. She’s allowing her opponents on the hard right Brexiteer wing of her party to say that she’s effectively keeping the UK in the single market and the customs union, but she’s not actually doing that, so she doesn’t get any of the benefits of the clarity and certainty that that would bring. And because there is no clarity it is likely, as things stand, that the Withdrawal Agreement provisions on backstop or extending the transition would kick in. And of course while I absolutely support whatever arrangements it takes to preserve peace in the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, that would put Scotland at a real competitive disadvantage with Northern Ireland which is another reason why I couldn’t support it.

AM: Nonetheless, here it is. 580 odd pages and I also have gone through - a strange lack of verbs in it. The real question is if this is
voted down, with the help of the SNP, in the House of Commons, what happens next? Because the clock keeps –
NS: Well that’s what I’ve just been trying to set out.
AM: Sure. The clock keeps ticking. Now you say MPs could vote for an alternative way forward, but that requires somehow trying to force the Prime Minister to go back and renegotiate something that Angela Merkel for instance says cannot be renegotiated now. We’re in an impossible position.

NS: Well no, I don’t think that’s the case you know. This is a Prime Minister who’s spend the last two and a half years saying that no deal is better than a bad deal, who’s now trying to tell people that a bad deal is essential to avoid no deal. The House of Commons should not allow itself to be placed in that fire or frying pan position.

AM: I’m sorry, if I’m sitting at home and I’m really worried about – I’ve listened to people like yourself and many others talk about no deal being catastrophic and I’m really worried about that and I know the clock is ticking and I also know that you can’t simply pass a motion in the House of Commons to stop this happening. I’m beginning to be worried that if you vote this down you will not have any alternative – you may not want a no deal but you may not have any alternative to that.

NS: Well, that’s what I’m trying to set out what I think should happen, because people are absolutely worried about this. So you know I understand and I think it is perfectly understandable for most people why the EU 27 would not want to get into an endless renegotiation of the deal of that is on the table just now. But if there is a different direction – If the House of Commons says look, we want to go down the road of single market customs union membership, we want more time to take this back to the people of the UK in another vote, we need an extension of Article 50, if
there is a clear change of direction then I believe the EU 27 would be prepared to look at that.

AM: Would go that way, okay.

NS: But that means those who don’t want this deal coming together. And there is a responsibility of people like me. I’m not in the House of Commons but on behalf of my party and those in the House of Commons now to have calm heads, clear thinking and to
that responsibility seriously –

AM: And to work with other parties?

NDS: - and to work together.

AM: Looking at statements you’ve made, the specifics of this deal – I haven’t completely given up on it yet – you say: “My party’s on record that we should come out a Common Fisheries Policy. The Common Fisheries Policy is not fair to Scottish fishermen.” Now Theresa May has negotiated to leave the Common Fisheries Policy. By doing this are you not letting down Scottish fishermen?

NS: No, absolutely. I think if you read that Withdrawal Agreement and the sketch outline of the future relationship, what we’re seeing is a UK government preparing to sell out Scottish fishermen with the talk of an agreement that would secure access of other countries to Scottish waters. But let me address the point from the SNP perspective. We’ve been longstanding critics of the CFP. We’ve argued for reforms of the CFP and we’ve continued to do that if we were to continue to be in the European Union. But of course the compromise option that I’ve been arguing now for the last two and a half years, of single market customs union, what in shorthand terms would be called the Norway option would not involve the UK going back into the Common Fisheries Policy. The problem here is that compromise options that people like me and you know, I would rather we were staying in the EU, have put forward, have been ignored by the Prime Minister you know, the Scottish government’s been ignored, our Scottish Parliament’s been ignored, we’ve been side-lined, the powers of our parliament
have been diluted over these past two and a half years. It’s time for the Prime Minister to start to listen and it’s time for those of us who think she’s taking this in the wrong direction to exercise our responsibility and come up with a better plan. What we can’t have are these people in the Tories that have no plan but just want to shout loudly about everything that everybody else is doing wrong.

AM: Let me ask you about your plans. One of them you say is another referendum on the whole business. In effect trying to reverse Brexit. What do you think the questions would be in that case?

NS: Well I think it could be if we get out a single market customs union people could be given the choice of whether they prefer that or to stay in the European Union. I conceded there has to be a discussion about what the precise remain – the option of remain in the EU in my view, if you’re going to ask people again, would absolutely have to be on that ballot paper, but I recognise there would be a discussion that has to be – that’s what I’m saying here. Those who don’t think that the Prime Minister’s deal is the right way to go have now a responsibility to come together and coalesce around an alternative. And I’m happy to play my part in that and I will seek to have discussions this week with other parties to get us into that position. I listened to Jeremy Corbyn –

AM: Another possibility much talked about is another General Election. In the view of the SNP is that likely? Are you preparing for it?

NS: I’d love to have another General Election to allow people to get rid of this shambles of a Tory government. The most dysfunctional, incompetent Tory government in my lifetime and you know I, like most of the rest of the people watching lived through the Thatcher years, so I would love to think that we could get a General Election, but the Fixed Term Parliaments Act make
that difficult to secure. We’ve got to have all options and we’ve got to exercise our responsibility to come forward with alternatives.

AM: So we’ve talked about a possible further Brexit referendum, we’ve talked about a possible further General Election. The last time that we were talking about this I asked you about another Scottish Independence referendum and you said you’d have to wait till you’d seen with the Withdrawal Agreement. You have now seen it. You’re saying you’ve read all 580 pages of it. Now you’ve seen it what are you going to do?

NS: Well I think it’s firstly appropriate to wait and see what the House of Commons does with this Withdrawal Agreement. As things stand just now it’s not getting the approval of the House of Commons. Wait until the dust settles. I will come forward with my views on what I think are the appropriate next steps for Scotland specifically in the not too distant future, but I think it’s reasonable to allow the dust to settle. We could be facing another General Election, we could be facing another Brexit vote, but one thing is beyond any doubt, the implications, the consequences of Scotland not being independent have been very stark in the last few months and particularly in the last week. Scotland’s interests have been sidelined, our parliament has been ignored, our interests have been disregarded.

AM: When are you going to have the guts to actually say, and so therefore we’re going to have another independence referendum?

NS: Well I’ll come on and talk to you, Andrew, about that as soon as I make that statement, but that will be in the not too distant future. But you know we have chaos reigning at Westminster just now –
AM: And in the context of that chaos are you talking to Jeremy Corbyn about the way forward?

MS: I’m keen to talk to Jeremy Corbyn and whoever in the House of Commons. As I said who knows what will be unfolding in the House of Commons this week, but I hope to be in London later this week, I hope to be in the Commons. I would happy to sit down with Jeremy Corbyn. I listened to him on another channel earlier this morning and there’s still an absence of leadership there, an absence of Jeremy Corbyn actually saying what he would do differently. So if I can help to get Labour into a position where we can coalesce I would be delighted to try to do that and I hope to have these discussions with Labour and with others over the course of this week.

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