AM: First of all let’s talk about the budget. In honest political terms it went quite well for the Chancellor didn’t it?
BG: It went well for him personally. But this was a budget that actually admitted failure and then said, ‘and we don’t know what to do about failure.’ Because if you look at the numbers going forward, they’ve admitted that growth is down by half a percent, that productivity is down by point seven percent, and investment is down by one and a half percent. And instead of them saying, ‘and this is our plan to get things back on the right track,’ they basically have tinkered with the economy. All the key things which at the general election they set out as the major challenges facing our country – look at social care, for example, which was the big issue of the election, there was nothing in this budget for social care.

AM: Their position is that there isn’t the huge amount of money that they would need to tackle these in a big way. Your position is spend the money.
BG: No, our position is grow the economy, Andrew.
AM: ...but that involves raising and spending quite a lot of new money.
BG: - just as in any business, if you are finding that you’re running at a deficit you’ve got two things to do: one is you can either cut your day to day spending – and we have said we will never borrow to fund day to day spending. What we’ve said is we will borrow to invest, to grow the economy so that as a proportion of GDP debt is reduced. And that is the burden that the economy faces. It’s actually whether the debt to GDP ratio is too large. At the moment it is. What the Chancellor said is that, ‘I’ve no idea how to get that down.’
AM: In that case, under Labour when will the deficit be paid off?
BG: What we’ve said, what we said, under Labour is that within five years that will come down. We will have the deficit reducing, and –
AM: When will it be eliminated by?
BG: But critically, critically what we’ve said is that we will be growing the economy so that debt is not the same burden on our economy as in current years.

AM: Can you say when the deficit, under your plans, will be eliminated?
BG: No. I’m not going to say that at all.

AM: But you’re attacking the government for not being able to have an answer, you don’t have an answer either. Okay, that’s fine.
BG: No, sorry, don’t put words in my mouth, okay. I didn’t attack the government for the timeframe in which they said that they would actually eliminate the deficit. If I’d wanted to do that I would have quoted the then Chancellor, George Osborne, on the 15th July 2015, when he – or eighth of July 2015. When he said that by 2015 it would be eliminated and that year on year the deficit would be reduced. It hasn’t. The debt as a proportion of GFP would be reduced.
AM: I’m sorry.. we’re now told by 2031 is the year that’s being used. Would that be the same under Labour, it could be till 2031 before this happens?
BG: Andrew, you’ve just heard one of our most eminent economists tell you that what, in your words was we’ve drawn a line and it could be on either side of it. Anybody who wants to forecast what our economy is going to be like in 2031 here, 14-15 years ahead of that date, when we have not even determined what the Brexit negotiations are going to look like, would be foolish. And you know that as well as I do.
AM: You mentioned the Brexit negotiations, kindly, so let me turn directly to that and the Irish border question. We have two propositions, really, on the table in the newspapers and in the political forums at the moment this morning. One is, as it were, the Irish government’s proposal, which is that Northern Ireland should be effectively inside some kind of customs union and single market, and in those circumstances there does not have to be a border between Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland, as things are at the moment. Then there is the alternative position, Nigel Dodds and the government are saying, ‘actually it’s very important that Northern Ireland comes out of the customs union, comes out of the single market with the rest of us, that’s what matters most.’ Which side are you on?
BG: Look, what this government has done is it has ruled out remaining a member of the single market or a member of the customs union. That is what they have said very clearly, that they are going to leave both of those institutions. We have not ruled those off the table, we’ve said they are still options. We recognise the benefits both of the single market and of a customs union. Once we leave the EU, of course, we can’t be in the customs union that we have, but of a customs union, we recognise the benefits of that, and that’s why we have left those options on the table. Unfortunately we are not at the negotiating table with the European Union. We’re not conducting those negotiations.

AM: You’re not, but there’s only two weeks now before these things have to be resolved. And in the context of there being only a fortnight left I think it’s fair to ask you not just what your options might be, what you might leave open, but what you would actually propose should happen.
BG: Well, you think it’s fair to ask this. I would say that we are not the government, what we have to try and do as best we can is mitigate, as Her Majesty’s loyal opposition, is to mitigate the damage that this government is doing. They have been absolutely chaotic in their negotiations.
AM: It is an agonising difficult choice, but it’s one that you’re not prepared to make.

BG: It’s not our call. And it would be foolish of an opposition to actually put out there and say, ‘this is the solution,’ when we’re not in the negotiating table itself. If we’re at the negotiating table we can have those discussions. I’d be very happy if Theresa May wanted to move over and call that election and let us do that. But until we’re round that table it’s not sensible to say what you can get out of the negotiations, because you’re not sitting there, like you and I are, looking at the whites of each other’s eyes and getting a deal.

AM: Alright.

BG: That’s what we need.

AM: It’s quite easy, however, as well, not to make that choice. We have two weeks, as I say, to go. What happens if we don’t get an agreement within those two weeks? What happens in the House of Commons?

BG: The Irish government are desperately worried about this, and we’re all desperately worried about this, but they in particular are worried because of course their economic growth depends on the trade relations that they have with the UK. It used to be much larger but now it’s about 17 per cent still. It’s a huge slice of their economy. And for that reason they are determined not to see a hard border. But there are politics playing into this, and we must ensure that nothing is done that damages the Good Friday Agreement. That to me is the bottom line, and that’s what everybody should keep in mind.

AM: Alright. Barry Gardiner, thanks very much for coming in and talking to us.