

THE ANDREW MARR SHOW

12TH JULY, 2020

NICOLA STURGEON MSP

First Minister of Scotland

(Rough transcript, check against delivery)

AM: Nicola Sturgeon, welcome. You have said that the rate of infection of Coronavirus in England is now five times worse than Scotland where you're pursuing an elimination strategy and yet you're not yet pressing the button on making people from England coming into Scotland quarantined. Why not?

MS: I said we will keep all of these things under review. I set out in parliament just on Thursday that our biggest risk, or certainly one of our biggest risks over the next few weeks is we have driven levels of the virus to very low levels in Scotland is the risk of importation into the country. Now that's why we've taken a very cautious decision about international quarantine and this is not a position I relish being in, it also means that we have to take a very close look at making sure that we are not seeing the virus come in from other parts of the UK. That's not political, it's not constitutional, it's just taking a similar view to countries across the world in terms of protecting populations from the risk of the virus. So it's not something we have decided to do at this stage, it's not something I'm immediately planning to do but I will take decisions the best I can to protect the health of Scotland and to do that absolutely from a public health perspective.

AM: So what are you looking at in a public health perspective? Are you waiting to see if there is a further increase in infection levels in England? And if that is the case, and you decide to ask people from England coming into Scotland to quarantine, how do you do that practically?

NS: Well look, don't focus all of this discussion on quarantine. One of the things that I think we must do in the immediate term and I

took part in a meeting, a telephone meeting with Michael Gove and the other First Ministers I think earlier last week and we need to work together on outbreak management. So we recently had a cross border outbreak. We think it started in Carlisle but spread into Dumfries and Galloway, so we worked together to make sure the right restrictions were in place. So fundamentally this is about where there are outbreaks as in Leicester right now, the right outbreak management being put in place and that then mitigates against having to put any border restrictions in place. So we need to look at these things very carefully and we need to be driven entirely by public health considerations.

AM: We saw some of your more enthusiastic supporters recently trying to stop cars at the border and turn them back. That's the kind of thing from your tone that you absolutely don't want to happen again?

NS: Absolutely not. This is not about saying to people in England they're not welcome in Scotland, of course people in England are welcome to Scotland, lots of people from England live in Scotland and vice versa. So this is not about politics, it's not about a constitutional agenda, it's just about taking decisions that try to protect people in Scotland as much as possible from Covid, just as the UK government I'm sure wants to do everything it can to protect the population in England. If you look at the situation in Australia right now you can't travel from Melbourne to Sydney because of the spike in cases in Melbourne. The Governor of New York has restricted travel from some of the worst affected states in America into New York. Leaders across the world are taking these very objective public health driven decisions and I'm determined to do likewise.

AM: And you've just made the case very strongly there for quarantining people from England coming into Scotland. What would need to change because one of your own advisers, Professor Devi Sridhar, Chair of Global Public Health at Edinburgh

University, has said, 'that many people cross the border every day, I think we will probably never get to full elimination of Coronavirus without England's cooperation.'

NS: Well I'd like to see the UK government be more explicit that it was trying to get to levels of Coronavirus that was virtually elimination levels but that's decisions from the Prime Minister and the UK to take. These are not decisions I will take lightly but they're equally not decisions I will shy away from. We need to be sure that any outbreaks in England have been properly managed, just as England will want to be sure that any outbreaks in Scotland are being properly managed. It's when there isn't that confidence that the concern about possible importation would grow, so we're looking very carefully at cases in Scotland. We had an increase in cases on Friday which then reduced again yesterday so we're looking literally at case by case right now to make sure we're doing everything necessary. There is a concern. I mean I noted the number of deaths in the UK yesterday was 148. I think 147 of those were in England alone. So you know we look at all of this very carefully and I will continue to take whatever decisions I and my colleagues in the Scottish government judge are necessary to keep the levels of this virus as low as possible. But we have the most significant easing of lockdown in Scotland ahead of us this week, so the fundamental primary responsibility to keep the virus low in Scotland is on the shoulders of all of us in Scotland to do the right things. About face coverings and avoiding crowded places, cleaning our hands, keeping two metres distance and following the advice to self isolate and get tested if we have symptoms.

AM: Nicola Sturgeon I mentioned Edinburgh University a moment ago. They also did a study which suggested that had Scotland introduced a lockdown just a week earlier, 2,000 lives could have been saved. With hind sight, I know it's a wonderful thing and all that, but with hind sight do you think it was a mistake not to lockdown earlier knowing what you know now?

NS: Look, I don't know that for sure because we're focused on managing this crisis day by day, trying to learn as we go. I've been pretty open and upfront all along. Mistakes will have been made. Some of those will have been simple straight forward mistakes, others will be about applying knowledge that we have now to decisions that were taken in when we didn't have that knowledge. In the fullness of times we will look back and very critically assess all of the decisions that were taken that will undoubtedly include the timing of lockdown. Scotland went into lockdown at the same time as the rest of the UK, but arguably that was at an earlier stage in the pandemic curve in Scotland. But we will also want to look at decisions that were taken around quarantining of international travel back then. I'm absolutely clear in my own mind that there must be a full analysis of all of that, for accountability but also that we learn lessons for the future.

AM: And in that same spirit may I ask you about care homes in Scotland. Over all the story in Scotland has been relatively positive compared to other places, but in care homes you had a particular problem and you were still discharging people a week or six days after they had stopped in England without testing. I think 1,300 people were discharged into Scottish care homes from Scottish hospitals in March and April and mandatory testing wasn't introduced until the end of – well the 21st of April – towards the end of April. Now you've said that you have some doubts about that looking back. Can you actually apologise for that policy and admit frankly now that that was a mistake?

NS: I regret and apologise for every death from this. I don't think it is appropriate for any politician to be defensive about this, but what I absolutely refute is that there was some particular problem in Scotland or that we didn't take great care. So from the issue of discharge from hospital into care homes that was following a policy of clinical risk assessment and strict guidance in place in care homes. The situation in care homes, not just in Scotland but across the UK and the world has been awful and I will be the first

person to concede that, but what I absolutely do not accept is that we have a particular problem. If you look at excess deaths and I discussed this with you the last time I was on the programme. If you look at excess deaths overall in care homes they are lower in Scotland than in England but we ascribe more of them to Covid. So I think more than 70% of excess deaths in care homes in Scotland have been attributed to Covid where the figure is around 50% in England, which raises the question what are those excess deaths in England attributable to if not Covid? So we are recording these I think more rigorously rather than having more care home deaths that some people have been suggesting.

AM: Let me turn to the other big announcement of the week, which was Rishi Sunak's announcement on the economic response to Covid and in the course of that I'm sure you heard him say: 'No nationalist can ignore the undeniable truth this help has only be possible because we are a united kingdom.' And he was talking about a total of 4.6 billion pounds which has gone to Scotland to help with Covid. He was right about that, wasn't he?

NS: No and fundamentally I don't think he's right to be making sort of overtly political points about this. I've tried throughout this not to do that because I think what we're dealing with right now is too important for that. But it's a nonsense argument. I mean look across the world from the Republic of Ireland. I heard your interview with the Taoiseach earlier on to smaller countries all over who have in some respects actually had bigger fiscal stimulus than the UK. But the issue here right now is that he holds the borrowing powers 'cause remember this is borrowed money and the people of Scotland will play their part in repaying that borrowing just as people elsewhere in the UK. It's a limitation on the power right now of the Scottish government that means we have to rely on the Treasury and if he wants to give more flexibility which we've been asking for for the Scottish government around borrowing in particular then we can do more even than we are doing right now as the Scottish government. But these kind of

nonsense points frankly I think are a bit regrettable and ridiculous, particularly given the severity of what we face.

AM: We're in this very, very strange situation now, Nicola Sturgeon where I am going to mention the fact that enthusiasm for independence, according to the polls, is now rising in Scotland and there is a clear majority for independence, and you don't talk about it. While this Coronavirus epidemic goes on, are you simply going to hit the pause button on all constitutional arguments and all constitutional developments?

NS: Look, at the moment I'm focused 100 percent on tackling Covid and people can agree with that or not agree with it, but until we're out of this crisis that is going to continue to be the case. I think everybody knows I want to Scotland to be independent, but maybe the scenario that you've just outlined there has a lesson in it for my own party. You know at no point during this have I weighed my decisions in political – a political basis or on a constitutional basis, but as you say, at a time when I and the SNP have not been talking about independence all the time but getting on with the job of autonomous decision making and trying to take the right decisions to get the country through a crisis, support for independence appears to have increased. So maybe there's a bit of a lesson in there about show not tell. So who knows.

AM: So it does sound as if no more talk about the next referendum, maybe for the rest of this year at least?

NS: Look, as long as I need to be focusing on the Coronavirus crisis and the economic legacy of that crisis, that is going to have my 100% focus. I haven't changed my view on independence. I think Scotland will be much better off as an independent country. I want to see Scotland become an independent country. None of that has changed, but I think the people across Scotland right now would expect me to have my entire focus on leading the country through the biggest crisis that any of us have ever experienced

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and that's what I'm going to continue to do and if in the process of doing that it's not my intention then people can see the benefits of autonomous decision making then as I say perhaps there is a lesson there.

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