

THE ANDREW MARR SHOW

INTERVIEW: SIR JOHN MAJOR

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Andrew Marr: And so to the main event part one. Sir John Major, who's struggled through every day of his premiership against rebellious anti-Brussels Tories. He's described the Leave campaign as an 'unforgiveable fraud' on the British people. And he joins me now. Those are strong words, Sir John. Are you referring, when you talk about that and the deceit of the Leave campaign to Boris Johnson in particular?

Sir John Major: Not particularly to Boris, no. I think it goes much wider than simply the leader. Of course, as the leader, Boris is in a position to stop it. But I felt that for several reasons. Firstly on the economy and what would happen if we actually left, the Leave campaign have said absolutely nothing to the British people, and what they have said about leaving is fundamentally dishonest and it's dishonest about the cost of Europe. And on the subject that they've veered towards, having lost the economic argument, of immigration, I think their campaign is verging on the squalid, and I've said so before and I'm happy to say so again.

AM: Is it not possible that these are thoroughly honourable men who have taken a big political risk, risked their own political reputations, their own political futures standing for something they fundamentally believe in, and which is agreed with by a huge number of British people? That these are the good guys, in fact?

JM: I've no doubt that there are many people in this country, including members of the Leave campaign, who thoroughly believe what they say. I've never questioned that. But I must say in Boris's case it was a rather late conversion. I don't know whether he had a day trip to Damascus and came back, but until the very last moment everyone thought he was in favour of staying. But he's made up his mind and I respect that. But I think what they have done now they have begun the campaign is to feed out to the British people a whole galaxy of inaccurate and frankly untrue information. And what they have not done is tell us what would

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be the position if we were to vote to leave. I think it would be chaotic and damaging, and I think the people who would suffer most would be the ordinary everyday man and woman in the street. And they need to tell us, if they wish us to leave, what it would be like and how they would then meet some of the objectives they've set out.

AM: They say this morning an extra 300,000 jobs would be created because we'd be free to strike our own trade deals with America and Australia and China and other countries.

JM: Well, it's fantasy. Firstly, we have something like three million jobs connected – I'm not saying they're wholly reliant – but connected to our present trade with Europe and essentially with the single market. I gather their current policy today is that they will leave the single market. There would also be a socking great hole, according to every commentator, in our public finances. So these promises of expenditure on the national health service or elsewhere are frankly fatuous. They are a deceit. We would lose a huge amount in terms of national income through trade, the small businesses who sell their goods to Europe, who would sell less because if we left the single market we would face a tariff barrier of probably around ten per cent. So we would sell less, people would lose their jobs, we would find ourselves in a much worse position. And the Leave campaign can turn to no serious organisation who believes what they have said about the economy and about the future of Britain and the single market.

AM: So to be clear, you're saying this is a deceitful campaign? To call a spade a spade, are you saying that Boris Johnson is lying?

JM: I'm not personalising this. Though I do find it very difficult to understand how Boris can justify the 350 million that he has on his battle bus, that he and Michael Gove in particular have defended time and again. You know, I know, the IFS knows, everyone knows, Boris knows, that the real net amount that we send to Europe is about one third of that. After the rebate and after the money paid back to our fishermen, to our farmers, to our researchers, the amount we send to Europe is about one third of the amount that they claim. Now, if they can't be straightforward and honest on a clear cut matter of fact like that, upon what else can we trust them?

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AM: You keep using words like ‘straightforward’, ‘honest’, ‘deceitful,’ and yet you say you’re not personalising it. You are accusing people of lying.

JM: I’m talking of the Leave campaign; I’m not necessarily talking of individuals. I’ll tell you exactly. I think throughout the whole of my political life people have regarded me as being guilty of understatement. I am angry at the way the British people are being misled. This is much more important than a general election. This is going to affect people, their livelihoods, their future for a very long time to come. And if they are given honest, straightforward facts and they decide to leave, then that is the decision the British people take. But if they decide to leave on the basis of inaccurate information, inaccurate information known to be inaccurate, then I regard that as deceitful. Now, I may be wrong but that is how I see their campaign. And this is so important for once I’m not prepared to give the benefit of the doubt to other people, I’m going to say exactly what I think, and I think this is a deceitful campaign. And in terms of what they’re saying about immigration, a really depressing and awful campaign. They are misleading people to an extraordinary extent.

AM: Well, let’s move to immigration if we could. When you were Prime Minister, I think when you left immigration was still below 50,000, around 48,000 something like that. It’s now a third of a million and rising fast. It’s not racist or xenophobic to be really worried about that, to be worried about the effect on all of us.

JM: No, no, no. I’m worried about it. Everybody is worried about that.

AM: But your side don’t seem to have an answer.

JM: Well, I don’t think they have an answer. We’ll come directly to that if you wish. Let me take the immigration point absolutely head-on. Yes, immigration is very high, and yes, this causes great troubles for us. Not only for us, but all across Europe. Half the world is on the move at the moment because of what is happening in North Africa and the Middle East, because of fears about Russia in Eastern Europe, because of the economic difficulty – within the eurozone, there are a lot of people on the move. And they come here because we are a great and successful country. The nonsense we hear from Leave about let’s get our mojo back and be a great country, we are a great, successful country, that is why people are coming to us. Now, how long will this last? It is a serious problem, you are going to see a diminution as

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the eurozone recovers, because – and it is recovering, it's now growing pretty much as fast as us, the eurozone. But it isn't just us. But the point that really angers me is the utterly false suggestion, repeated more than once, not in a single offhand remark but in scripted, carefully prepared speeches, that we face the risk of 88 million Turks coming here. Now, firstly Turkey are not in the European Union. They're unlikely to be in the European Union in the next decade or two. Even if by some chance they were, we are outside Schengen. And in any event, is it seriously suggested, as they do, that all 88 million Turks would come here? Apparently for a higher national living wage. On the one hand they're saying migrants are depressing wages, and on the other people are flooding in to get our higher national wage. It's nonsense.

AM: Let's be clear, Sir John.

JM: Nonsense on stilts.

AM: The EU wants Turkey to join, the British government wants Turkey to join, the Prime Minister has said he'd pave the way from Brussels to Ankara. So this is not a complete fantasy, it's quite possible. And this choice in this election, this decision, could be with us for 20 or 30 or 50 years' time, during that people...

JM: The Turks have been negotiating for the best part of 30 years a whole series of different things that have to be negotiated. They've negotiated one of about 30. Even if they were able to reach agreement with the European Union, any one nation in the European Union could veto their joining. The French have already said they would have a referendum on that issue. The Germans almost certainly will follow suit. Turkey will not be in the European Union for a very, very long time, if ever, for a whole series of practical reasons. And the Leave campaign know that. That's the point, they know that.

AM: There are people watching this who will say, hold on a second, this is Sir John Major, this is the man who negotiated the Maastricht Treaty. And at that time you got your opt-outs and so forth – I remember it very well, I was there at the time, in the rain, in the dark and so forth. But nonetheless we were being told at the time that the European Union was not going to evolve into a very centralised super-state and sprawl and spread. And actually your critics then were right, because that's what's happened.

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JM: No. No it hasn't. Firstly, you're quite right, I did negotiate the opt-out of the single currency. I'm told by the Leave campaign I'm wrong on everything on Europe. Well, I certainly wasn't wrong on that. I also –

AM: What about those other treaties which followed, which followed nonetheless, in a direction of travel?

JM: Not under my premiership they didn't. We were also out of Schengen because I declined to join it in 1996. Now, what happened: we negotiated at Maastricht a safeguard, the subsidiarity safeguard, which was then bypassed. David Cameron has now effectively reinstated that with his red card system. So it has been reinstated. Any more power in a treaty – now, this is very important – any more power in a treaty to Europe would have, by British law, now to be approved in a referendum. So if there is a grab towards a super-state, which they may integrate further inside the eurozone, but we're not in the eurozone and we're not going to integrate further.

AM: Does that not live us a bit like a kind of rickety sidecar stapled to the side of a vast Mercedes going to a place we don't want to go?

JM: Only if you think we're a little country. We're not a little country, we're a big country. We're one of the biggest countries in the European Union. We are outside the eurozone, we are not responsible for their debts, we are not going to be responsible for their debts. We are not going to enter the eurozone. We're staying in a wider Europe and we're going to continue to trade with Europe if we are wise, but we are not involved in what is happening in the part of Europe that is in difficulty. But if we cut ourselves adrift, we will become a vastly diminished country.

AM: We're talking about the world after Brexit, if that's what happens, and you'll have seen a whole series of pledges now, about 100 million a week for the NHS, about an Australian-style points system, about new farming subsidies and much else. It's beginning to look like another manifesto isn't it?

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JM: Well, it's certainly very ill thought-out. I mean, the concept that the people running the Brexit campaign would care for the national health service is a rather odd one. I seem to remember Michael Gove wanting to privatise it. Boris wanted to charge people for using it. And Iain Duncan Smith wanted a social insurance system. The NHS is about as safe with them as a pet hamster would be with a hungry python. So I don't think that's very wise. As far as immigration is concerned, what they're planning is immensely difficult. Let us suppose that they win, let us suppose that for a moment – and it's possible, and it's possible – let us suppose they win and their policies on immigration were implemented. Firstly, as you know, the Scots may hold another referendum. We might end up with Britain out of the UK (sic) – out of the European Union, and Scotland out of the UK. If Scotland is out of the UK –

AM: England alone.

JM: Well, England and Wales. But you, Andrew, you will be a –

AM: I'll be sent back.

JM: You'll be a migrant.

AM: I'll be sent back over the border, I'm sure.

JM: How are they going to – how are they going to reduce their numbers? There are more people coming into this country from outside the European Union than inside. Who are the people they're going to send back? The 52,000 doctors in the national health services, doctors and nurses? The 80,000 care workers?

AM: To be fair, they're not talking about sending anybody back. Because of the Luxembourg Agreement, they can stay.

JM: How are they – we won't be in the European Union if we leave. How are they going to reduce their numbers? Who are they going to stop coming in? The footballers who enchant us? I think we need some practical information and we're not getting it. People are being invited to vote for a pig in a poke.

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AM: Two final thoughts just before we finish. Do you think this is about Boris Johnson's personal ambition?

JM: Well, I've no idea. I can't see inside Boris's mind, and I wouldn't attempt to try and do so. But I would just offer this piece of friendly advice – I like Boris, I don't know him well, but what I've seen of him I like.

AM: Well you took him off the candidates list, didn't you once a long time ago?

JM: No I did not. No, that's utterly untrue. No, I did not. He's a very engaging and charming court jester. And a very engaging and charming public figure, and he's very likeable and people like him. But I think I would offer him this piece of advice: if the Leave campaign led by Boris continue to divide the Conservative Party as they are doing at the present time, and if Boris has the laudable ambition, for it is a laudable ambition, to become Prime Minister, he will find if he achieves that that he will not have the loyalty of the party he divided. Iain Duncan Smith was serially disloyal in the 1990s. When he became leader he was surprised that no one was loyal to him. Now, Boris should learn from that. And I think Boris – all his instincts in the past have been those of a One Nation Tory, which is where I stand. He seems to have drifted away from that, with the way in which they're approaching immigration and some of the other things. I'd like to see him get back, because if he gets back he is an engaging Conservative, important engaging Conservative figure.

AM: Do you think the Conservative Party is in danger of dividing?

JM: Well, we'll have to wait and see. All I can say is that whether the Conservative Party divide or not is one thing we must look at in the future. But that is not as important as the decision that we have to make. This is not about political parties, it's not about the elites, it's about the everyday men and women in the street and their children and their grandchildren. It is their future that will play Russian roulette with if we leave the European Union.

AM: My last question. Given what you've said about Boris Johnson today and in the past, do you think he's fit to be Prime Minister?

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JM: I'm not making judgements about whether anybody is fit to be Prime Minister. That's a matter for a much wider view than mine. It's a matter for the Conservative Party, ultimately it's a matter for a whole electorate. So I wouldn't be so impertinent as to have a suggestion either way. I merely say that whether Boris is Prime Minister is no doubt a very important matter for Boris and many other people, it is less important than the decision we have to take in less than three weeks' time. That is crucial. And I must say, if I may put it this way, of all the participants there is nobody on the Leave side of the campaign who has, as I have, sat at the top table in Europe for seven years, and I know from what I have seen inside the European Union that what they say about unelected elites is absolute hogwash. The Commission, for example, are answerable to David Cameron, Angela Merkel, Francois Hollande and the others. They're appointed for a limited period of time, they're told to produce legislation which then has to be approved by ministers, the European Parliament, the Westminster Parliament. The belief an unelected elite is running wild is yet another piece of copper-bottomed Leave nonsense.

AM: Sir John Major, thank you very much for talking to us this morning.

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