Back here, twenty years ago to the day Black Wednesday blew a hole through the Conservative Government of Sir John Major - a man who had one of the most unusual family backgrounds of any modern prime minister. His mother and father (a man born during Queen Victoria’s reign) were music hall artistes, and Sir John grew up on tales of their unconventional life. Well music hall is in many ways a lost world, killed off by the cinema and by television and radio, but perhaps its spirit lives on. Sir John Major’s written a book about it all. We’ll be talking about that, today’s politics, and much more. Sir John, good morning. Thanks for joining us.

Sir John Major:
Good morning, Andrew.

Andrew Marr:
You called this book My Old Man. And that really is where it starts because your father wasn’t just a music hall artiste; he topped the bill in some of the great music halls of the time. He was a substantial figure in his way.

Sir John Major:
Well he was in music hall for about thirty years, from 1900 to 1930, and he certainly topped the bill at the second tier theatres. I wouldn’t claim at all he was one of the greats of the music hall, he plainly wasn’t, but he and his then wife, Kitty, very dependable, very good, always working, on the bill with most of the greats at some time or another; and then formed their own show and then they topped the bill for a long time. So yeah, he passed on many stories about those days.

**ANDREW MARR:**

Now it is a lost world. We’ll never know quite what it was like to hear these people because they weren’t recorded, or most of them weren’t recorded until very late on. But just give us a sense of the range of performers who you describe in this book.

**SIR JOHN MAJOR:**

I learned quite a lot about it at my father’s bedside when he was very old and ill. I was his audience as a small boy. He was in mid-sixties when I was born and he would talk to me about his life on the stage and all the greats both that he had worked with and that perhaps he’d seen and not worked with. But music hall had a huge range. It might be singing comic songs - that’s the staple part of it - comedians, animal acts, monologists, blackface acts. Almost anything you could think of as variety today would have been part of music hall then.

**ANDREW MARR:**

And you argue that quite a lot of what we think of as quintessentially British humour from the age of sort of radio and television - you know The Goons and Monty Python and all the rest of it - has its origins in people like Dan Leno, some of those patter merchants on the musical stage?

**SIR JOHN MAJOR:**

I don’t think there’s any doubt about that.

**ANDREW MARR:**

Yeah.

**SIR JOHN MAJOR:**
I mean if you actually look how they performed, what they did and what we know of it, a great deal of it has been handed down. Humour is continuous - what amuses the British psyche a hundred years ago tends to tickle it today - and, yes, it has been handed down. And they were astonishing characters. If you look at their background and their life stories, some of them are full of pathos, they came from nowhere. Some never got anywhere and their lives were full of hardship. Others had huge success, earned vast sums of money, perhaps spent it and then ended up dying young and often destitute. These stories are very remarkable stories of pretty remarkable people.

ANDREW MARR:
It struck me that they were quite like the stories of so many kind of would-be rock stars touring the country, hoping to make it. A few of them make it and maybe take too many drugs and drink and so on later on. But it’s also a bit like the sort of popular culture you see in so much television even now, the sort of dance shows and so on.

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
Nothing’s new …

ANDREW MARR:
No.

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
… and a great deal of it is repetitive. What I think is different was in those days music hall was the entertainment. There was very little to compete with it, as there is so much today, and it sunk deep into the British psyche. In the 1840s, for example, when it began, that was a terrible decade when the country might well have come to revolution. It turned revolution, potential revolution in the 1840s, into a patriotic roar of joy twenty years later. And of course it had its great days at the height of empire - hugely proud, hugely patriotic, hugely pro-British - but it fed mainly upon the lives of the people who actually attended those, and the great artists reflected those lives and sang back to them their lives and talked about their lives. It was empathetic across …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So quite hard-edged actually a lot of it, yes?
SIR JOHN MAJOR:
Very hard-edged.

ANDREW MARR:
Yeah.

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
I mean some of the social commentary has the force of a pile driver, particularly artists we don’t remember today like Jenny Hill - very early feminist, talked very much about the lives of people who were downtrodden and why they were downtrodden. Well worth reading about her.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Revisiting?

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
Absolutely worth revisiting her.

ANDREW MARR:
Okay. Let’s turn to politics rather more recently. I mentioned Black Wednesday.

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
The music hall is much more fun.

ANDREW MARR:
(laughs) Much sunnier perhaps than Black Wednesday. Nonetheless, that was a sort of existential crisis really in many ways for this country. Twenty years on, we are still looking at Europe and are particularly concerned about what is happening to the Euro project now. How dangerous do you think things remain because it’s you know the longest, most boring crisis I can remember?

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
Well there are two things that are inextricably linked, of course. Firstly there is
Europe and the Euro crisis, and then there’s the state of the British economy. You can’t regard those as wholly separate entities. You have to look at the two of them. If you take Europe first, Europe has continually evolved. It’s evolved a good deal further towards centralisation because of economic failure in Europe over recent years than anybody imagined in this timescale; and what you’re now seeing out of failure, not success, is the Euro core looking to integrate further, much more towards a federal structure.

ANDREW MARR:
Which this country, in your view, could have nothing to do with really?

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
Well if you recall … You mentioned Black Wednesday. You might also have mentioned that at Maastricht, I opted sterling out of the Eurozone because I didn’t think the Eurozone would work without fiscal union as well as economic union, and so we are apart from that, thank goodness, and we will stay apart from it. But if the Eurozone (as I believe) continue to integrate over the next ten years, you’re going in essence within ten years - this isn’t going to happen overnight - within ten years you’re going to have a Euro core that is to all intents and purposes federal. Now if that happens to a portion, a core of the European Union, it changes that core’s relationship with the rest of the European Union. And if they do that, the rest of the European Union may feel that it is appropriate to change their relationship with the core and with the European Union as a whole …

ANDREW MARR:
Yes. And …

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
… and I think that offers an opportunity for us to clean up one of the long running sores of British politics, which is the nature of our relationship with Europe.

ANDREW MARR:
And that would have to be a referendum and so on if it was a treaty and all the rest of
SIR JOHN MAJOR:
Well if it was a treaty, of course it would …

ANDREW MARR:
It would have to be, right.

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
… and it would be a treaty in due course.

ANDREW MARR:
So therefore. Let me ask about the British economy directly at the moment because these are grim times. I mean this is the third quarter of technical recession, the Chancellor incredibly unpopular. You’ve been through a period where you know you are just buffeting through a hard time. What’s your … A, what’s your analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the economy; and what’s your advice?

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
Well, firstly, it would be very surprising if the Chancellor wasn’t unpopular. The Chancellor has to do unpopular things. But I think it’s worth making the point that David Cameron, George Osborne and Nick Clegg aren’t imposing these cuts out of some malign wish to hurt people. They’re imposing these cuts because the last government left the cupboard bare. The money was gone, the gold was gone. They had no choice but to take tough medicine, and I think people need to understand that is why they are doing it. That said, of course it’s unpopular and you must expect the Chancellor to be unpopular. Nothing surprising at all about that. But since I’m no longer in politics, I can say something that perhaps as a politician I wouldn’t. You mentioned Black Wednesday. Around about that time, Norman Lamont was taken to pieces by commentators for suggesting there were green shoots, but in retrospect, we can see that Norman was right. Recovery begins from the darkest moment.

I’m not certain but I think we have passed the darkest moment and I will tell you why. There are some oddities in the figures at the moment. Why in the depths of this
recession is employment growing, why is industrial production going up, why has the stock market risen? I could list a number of other things. There are things happening out there that will become apparent and we don’t quite know why or how. My guess - and this is something a minister can’t say but I can - my guess is in due course we will find that we pass the bottom, that that last revision of GDP when we had a 0.5 per cent reduction is less bad than we thought it was, and that we are starting on what will be a slow road to recovery. I think that is beginning to happen and I hope that is the case, but I believe it is going to turn out to be so for a vast range of reasons.

ANDREW MARR:
Meanwhile, party conference season, you don’t have to be involved in it anymore, but there is another Conservative Prime Minister, there are more kind of whisperings and challenges and so on. Of course he’s got Boris Johnson bouncing around, which you never had. Do you think the Conservative Party needs to calm down and settle down or do you think this is an inevitable part of you know the bad year?

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
Well there’s nothing surprising about people being critical when times are tough. That is true in the Conservative Party, is true in the Liberal Democrat Party, it’s been true in the past. You saw those divisions in the 80s in the Conservative Party with wets and dries. You saw it in the 90s between … well on the general issue of Europe. You’re seeing it again. It is an inevitability of politics. But I would have thought if the Conservative Party has learned anything in the last twenty years, it’s learned that regicide is not a good idea.

ANDREW MARR:
Well has it? That’s the question.

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
I think it has and I think the concept of people challenging David Cameron is an extremely good newspaper story, fills huge numbers of columns. And Boris is a very attractive and able and intelligent politician doing a supremely good job I think in London, but Boris isn’t in parliament. Boris hasn’t said he wishes to become Prime Minister. Quite the reverse. And the belief that suddenly everything is going to
change - you’re going to have a leadership challenge and you’re going to have a replacement of prime minister - I just think that isn’t in the real world. We aren’t. David Cameron is Prime Minister, he’s going to remain Prime Minister and he’s going to contest the next election and I very much hope he’s going to win it.

**ANDREW MARR:**
And so your message to all of those backbenchers who are constantly contacting newspapers and saying they want to kill the Prime Minister, they’re getting names on bits of paper, all the familiar stuff - your message to them?

**SIR JOHN MAJOR:**
My message to them is look at history. Disunity costs votes. Unity helps a government achieve the changes in our economy that we wish to see. There’s good for the nation, good for the economy, good for them and good for the next election.

**ANDREW MARR:**
And they should belt up?

**SIR JOHN MAJOR:**
Your words, not mine.

**ANDREW MARR:**
All right. After the death of Princess Diana, you were guardian for the princes. Now they’re both back on the front pages again. These pictures have caused an absolute furore in this country and it seems that St. James’s Palace, the Prince is actually going to go to court in France to take action against the publishers and, who knows, also the photographers concerned. Do you think that’s an overreaction or do you think that’s fair enough?

**SIR JOHN MAJOR:**
I think it’s absolutely right. I think it’s absolutely right, so that people in future know where the boundaries should be. I mean the boundaries have plainly been crossed. I mean I don’t think we need mince words about these photographs. The way they’ve been obtained is tasteless. It is the action of a Peeping Tom. In our country, we
prosecute Peeping Toms. That’s exactly what they’ve done and they’ve been peeping with long lenses from a long way away. They’re very distasteful and I’m absolutely delighted. I have often in the past been critical of the British media. I thoroughly applaud the fact that they won’t touch these pictures with a bargepole. I think they deserve credit for not doing so and it’s a pity that other people overseas have lower standards.

ANDREW MARR:
And if you bumped into Mr Berlusconi this morning, you’d presumably have a few words for him too?

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
It’s very unlikely and it might not be a very good conversation.

ANDREW MARR:
It might not be a very good conversation. The more general media climate, of course the British papers are waiting for the outcome of the Leveson Inquiry and so on. What would you like to see?

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
Well I gave my evidence to Leveson. I considered it carefully, I prepared it carefully, I gave lengthy evidence. I’ve no intention of either adding or subtracting to it.

ANDREW MARR:
All right.

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
Leveson heard evidence from every conceivable point of view. I didn’t hear it all. I’m content to wait and see what he recommends.

ANDREW MARR:
Prince Harry is obviously in a place of danger, Camp Bastion in Afghanistan. The Taliban claimed that they are attacking that camp and they have killed considerable numbers of people to try and get at him. Do you think it’s right that he is out there?
The danger is always that he’s putting other people’s lives at risk. You know we understand that he wants to get out there and fight and do his duty, but is there a danger that by putting him into such a place we’re unnecessarily endangering others?

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
I think there are several points to consider. The first is that Prince Harry trained with his colleagues. He will wish to serve with his colleagues. He most emphatically would not wish to move. The second point, I think it would be a huge propaganda triumph for the Taliban if Prince Harry were to be moved. And, thirdly, I think there’s a great deal of an attempt to create public relations in the posturing of the Taliban at the present time. The army knows what it’s doing. It will determine whether there is a risk to those serving with Prince Harry as well as Prince Harry, and it will make its judgments based on that. I don’t think advice from external quarters on that will either be well informed or valuable.

ANDREW MARR:
And there’s been some talk about pulling out troops early from Afghanistan. Would that help the situation in any way?

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
Well I don’t think it’s related. I don’t think you can relate that point …

ANDREW MARR:
Sure, to the Harry one. Sure.

SIR JOHN MAJOR:
… to the question of Prince Harry. I think there is a credible case for looking at when we actually withdraw troops. The moment that President Obama said he was going to withdraw troops in 2014, the Taliban were on notice as to when the NATO troops would leave and a large part of the Taliban if they have any sense probably moved into North West Pakistan and are sitting there in that lawless wild west part of Pakistan waiting to come back after the troops have left. Having given notice of a date upon which we leave …
ANDREW MARR: That’s difficult.

SIR JOHN MAJOR: … I think you have changed the game …

ANDREW MARR: Difficult.

SIR JOHN MAJOR: … and changed it totally.

ANDREW MARR: Sir John Major, for now thank you very much indeed.

SIR JOHN MAJOR: My pleasure.

INTERVIEW ENDS