EM: All those promoting the case for Britain remaining in the EU have traditionally deployed the arguments of fear of what Brexit might look like. They’ll tell you of instability, of economic ruin, of the unknown, that remaining in is the way to preserve everything you know that works. Except these days nothing about Europe, whether it’s the migrant exodus or Schengen or the borders or the ability to respond to terrorism, looks particularly stable or known. One man whose job is to convince us it really is, is Alan Johnson, who’s leading Labour’s campaign to stay in. He joins me now. Very nice of you to come in. Is it a risk to leave the EU?

AJ: A huge risk. I mean, we’ve been members for 40 years, so I participated in 1975 – you were too young, Emily – and at that time there were nine member states, we’d only just joined. In effect it was the referendum whether to go in. No country has ripped themselves away from this crucial international body. You just heard Amber Rudd talking about whether they can make that deal on climate change stick. Well, there’s one continent that can make it stick, because we have the procedures and the relationship and the process to actually do that, which is Europe. Through the European Union. We can’t solve climate change on our own, we can solve it – we can help solve it much more effectively by working with other countries.

EM: But it ignores so much, doesn’t it, to say that the risk is in going out, not in staying in? When people look at Europe now they say this is a continent in crisis, whether it’s the millions crossing continents to come here, no uniformity of police, porous borders, known Jihadis perhaps coming from Syria through to Paris. People look at this and say, ‘this is not what we signed up to. This is not the Europe of ’75. Do we want any more of it?’
AJ: And if you look back to ’75, it was all about political union, because only political union can do things like David Cameron will be arguing on Thursday – just leave Brexit to one side, he’ll be arguing for more control on guns across the European Union. They can work together. Now, all of the things you’ve mentioned are arguments for staying in Europe. No one who voted to go in in ’75 voted in because it would be, you know, all the problems of the world will be solved. They voted to go in because solving those problems, we can do that much more effectively in an increasingly interdependent world as part of Europe. And incidentally, on the issue about refugees, you know, Europe is trying very hard to resolve that. We ought to be at the heart of that, helping them to resolve it. Instead of that, Britain seems to be over by the exit door, whingeing and moaning, instead of playing its full role in Europe.

EM: You’ve got Germany saying one thing and you’ve got Hungary saying another, they’re diametrically opposed on what should be a central core issue. How do you know, how can you say there is uniformity of action when you see a continent that can’t agree with itself anywhere?

AJ: Because if they were all separate countries then they’d be doing that anyway to a much greater degree and you’d be looking for some kind of formulation to bring them together to thrash these things out. Now, actually Britain is much better placed, we are part of the Dublin Accord, but not part of Schengen, which means that refugees from outside the UK have to register in the first country they come to.

EM: At the moment.

AJ: But they need a visa to come into Britain.

EM: At the moment.
AJ: If we leave the European Union we lose the Dublin Accord, and incidentally we lose that protection at our most vulnerable point, Calais to Dover, where Britain has effectively moved its border to Calais because we are members of the European Union and have that relationship. It won’t survive exit.

EM: The trouble is we’ve heard reassurance on this stuff from Labour in the past: back in 2004 you predicted 15,000 a year would come through the doors; 600,000 came within the first two years. Why would anyone trust your numbers? Why would we listen to Labour on immigration matters and on the EU?

AJ: Well, this is a completely different thing. It’s about free movement within the EU. What you have to remember –

EM: It’s about trust when you’re putting those arguments forward, right?

AJ: Well, I think what Labour would argue – we gave the British people the first referendum they’d had on this, and we would say that the 40 years since then has seen Britain much better protected in terms of consumer affairs, much better protected in terms of people at work, because of the social dimension to Europe, and Europe is bigger than just this single issue that David Cameron has concentrated on, which is in-work benefits for migrants. We actually think there’s a case to increase what’s called habitual residency, which is coming about three to six months, but the way to go about that is to build alliances, to make friends, and to genuinely influence what’s going on.

EM: On that issue then –

AJ: Not to make this one package, a kind of yes or no as if reform of Europe was an event, when it’s a process.
AM: Work benefits paid out to migrants is something that you will continue to back and you do not back the prime minister who says that has to end?

AJ: Well, we think there’s a – habitual residency should be increased. We think there’s lots of allies in Europe for that. What David Cameron did was say it should be four years, which no one thought he’d ever get even close to, and then make this the total focal point of what’s going on in Europe.

EM: Lots of socialists support that, lots of people think it’s crazy that the UK economy should be paying out to remain in so they should be able to get tax credits or help with housing when they haven’t contributed anything into the system.

AJ: Well, there’s two ways around that, of course, Emily. Most other European countries have a system where you contribute, so there is a contributory system to benefits. We – that was the original idea of the Labour government in 1945, but it’s been diminished. So we could return to that and that means our domestic situation, there’s no discrimination because that is our domestic situation, but there’s also a will in other European Union countries to increase habitual residency. The way to deal with that is to be a participating partner of Europe, to be at the centre of issues, to be leading and not leaving. But quite apart from that –

EM: 74 per cent of people that are polled back the prime minister on this. There is real nervousness and there is real concern about that sense that small communities, your own former front bencher, Tristram Hunt, has said in his community this is what’s happening. He recognises that. Do you? People are getting crowded, they’re forced to deal with supplies and services that aren’t there. You must surely recognise this is a major concern for people.
AJ: It’s a concern that we can in terms of our own domestic policy do a lot to address because lots of companies are bringing over workers for instance from eastern Europe when they could be using British workers, but they’re doing it under the guise of agency workers. There’s an issue there to be addressed as well.

EM: Down the line somewhere is the issue of Turkey: Whether Turkey joins or not. It’s a long running thing. It’s a rambling thing, but this could be another, what, 77 million people now that could, if they wanted, come to the UK. Work, claim benefits, the rest of it.

AJ: Yeah. Let’s just make one very important point about this Emily. The issue about Europe is bigger than the sum of its parts. This issue of free movement, which you’re concentrating on, is an issue that benefits Britons. No country has more of its people living and working in other developed countries than Britain. More than Poland –

EM: but is that what you say to communities –

AJ: More than Poland. No, no, now what we say –

EM: Is that what you say, go and work somewhere else or get -

AJ: Yeah, but what I say is, what I say is the referendum won’t be on one aspect of this, it won’t be on one narrow dimension of this. It will be on the whole issue about whether we stay part of Europe or not. And every country that’s voted not to be part of the European Union that’s in Europe, has free movement. Has accepted free movement as part of the deal for trading this enormous trading block.

EM: But what we’re talking about, you yourself have said it. This is a once in a generation decision. People have to look at the long
term and that has to include the risks. Not just of where we are now, but what might happen.

AJ: Absolutely.

EM: What happens if a government comes in that says I’m not going to stick to that, or I am going to allow more benefits to people or I am going to increase whatever the free movement can be. People have to go into this saying, I know that the next whatever, 30 years are not going to attack my community or my way of living or, you know, hurt my economical status even more, because that’s the risk.

AJ: I hope it’s more than 30 years. I think it’s the most profound political decision of my lifetime. But people will know in an increasingly inter-dependent world we need to be part of our continent facing - integrated into your continent, not out there in isolation. Of course not every problem can be solved, but Europe isn’t something that’s done to us, Europe’s something that we participate in. It’s the forum in which we deal with our interdependence.

EM: That’s not what people think at the moment though is it?

AJ: It’s as simple as that.

EM: they do feel it’s done to us, that’s what people think.

AJ: Some people think that but I tell you, you know, people are more intelligent than perhaps they’re given credit for, for some of this kind of simplistic stuff. People understand. They understood in ’75 the importance of being part of our continent, and actually leading and playing a role in there, and I’m sure they’ll understand that when the referendum comes. But this will be a
very impassioned and important debate and I don’t think in any – that anyone should be at all complacent about the outcome.

ENDS