ANDREW MARR:
When it comes to the great Conservative Party debate over Europe, there is no one who knows the territory better than Lord Heseltine. He confronted Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, he stood at John Major’s side in the 90s, and he continues vigorously to make the case for Britain to be at the heart of the EU. He joins me now from Oxfordshire. Welcome Lord Heseltine.

LORD HESELTINE:
Andrew, nice to talk to you.

ANDREW MARR:
I wonder does this feel to you like deja vu all over again? There’s John Major wins an unexpected but significant election victory, a relatively small but perfectly workable majority and then goes straight into a confrontation with his party over Europe. It feels familiar to say the least.

LORD HESELTINE:
Well yes, but of course you’re cutting the story in half. It’s been part of my life ever since the end of the Second World War. It’s always been controversial. And if you try
to change the way people operate, it is always controversial. I mean you know go back a thousand years. There were ten kingdoms in England and just imagine the problems of getting rid of them into one. If you think of the experience I had in the 1970s when we reduced the number of local authorities from 1,400 to 400, it was blood. I was literally chased out of Conservative meetings by Conservative councillors. So anything that changes the assumptions and the structure of society is deeply held and very controversial.

ANDREW MARR:
How do you feel now about the prospect of a referendum because these are un-chancy things?

LORD HESELTINE:
Well I tell you what I do feel very clearly; that the issue is to whether or not it’s resolved. The legislation has been introduced already into the House of Commons and what I would … Without trying to sort of push anyone or anything like that, virtually without doubt, with the very remarkable work of George Osborne, it is David Cameron who won that election for the Conservative Party, and I would have hoped that given that there’s going to be a referendum people would understand, as your headline said, the complexity of what he’s got to do and the prizes that he might win and not to confuse his negotiation with a sort of backdrop of campaigning which in my experience can only confuse the job he has to do and make it harder.

ANDREW MARR:
So are you really saying … There’s now 110 Conservative MPs signed up to Conservatives for Britain. The small fringe has become most of the party in a sense during the course of the last 20 or 30 years. Are you saying this is a moment for them to pipe down?

LORD HESELTINE:
Well you see Conservatives for Britain, I could sign up for that. What the heck else would you expect us to do? I mean do you think that Mrs Merkel could sign up for anything that didn’t say Conservatives for Germany or President Hollande Conservatives for France?
ANDREW MARR:
It’s a title though.

LORD HESELTINE:
I wrote a book called The Challenge of Europe: Can Britain Win? The only point of foreign policy is to enhance the national opportunity and stature of your own country, and no government in any country would ever do anything else. So of course we’re in Europe because we think that we as a nation have a better platform or more trading opportunities or more peace than we would anywhere else. That’s why we do it. So someone says Conservatives for Britain, well sign me up.

ANDREW MARR:
I’m not sure you’d be very welcome, but I’ll take that into cognizance as the lawyers say. What would you say to all of those people who say yes well I do understand the arguments for being in Europe and so forth, but frankly this uncontrolled and uncontrollable migration from the former Eastern European countries into Britain is too fast and it’s changing our society, it’s changing our culture, we don’t like it, and it appears there is nothing whatever we can do about it?

LORD HESELTINE:
Well that changes the debate to immigration. And the interesting thing is that immigration is at the top of public concern. The issue of Europe I think is ninth, so the two have become interwoven.

ANDREW MARR:
They have.

LORD HESELTINE:
Now I have no doubt at all, I’ve got no doubt at all that the prime minister was right to decide that he was going to renegotiate the issue about immigration, and it’s very complex for various reasons but he’s right to do it. But he’s more likely to be successful in doing it if the people with whom he’s negotiating feel he has the backing of the party that he leads. But …
ANDREW MARR:

*(over)* What … I’m sorry.

LORD HESELTINE:

… but it is complex. I mean one of the things that I find most interesting about the immigration one is the way in which we have become extraordinarily dependent in all sorts of ways, particularly the health service, on people from overseas. But of course there is no doubt that the public want to see tougher controls and I think that is something the government already is addressing and is determined to do, but they have to talk to their European partners about the European element of it which is only a part of it.

ANDREW MARR:

Absolutely, because of course at the centre of all of this is the proposal to remove tax credits for four years from migrant workers who come into this country. Aren’t continental politicians quite right when they say this would be discriminatory and against the spirit of Europe?

LORD HESELTINE:

Well I’m a sceptic about this for a very simple reason. I understand the argument about the free movement and of course it’s important, but there is a clear understanding in the original arrangements of the treaty that there can be phased arrangements for new accession countries. So the principle has already been breached at that point. It seems to me that it could be seriously argued that, whilst accepting the principle, if the scale gets out of kilter for a particular reason – like the imbalance in the success of the economies – then there has to be an agreed pace at which the process can go. But if you’re going to argue that sort of case to 26 other countries, you have to do it in a quiet voice, probably behind closed doors, and not turn it into a sort of …

ANDREW MARR:

*(over)* Megaphone.
LORD HESELTINE:
(over) … hectoring debate in which they feel affronted.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright. We could talk all morning about this and I would like to, but I have time’s winged chariot at my back, Lord Heseltine, so for now thank you very much indeed for joining us.

INTERVIEW ENDS