ANDREW MARR:
The referendum on whether should stay in the EU may be some way off, but already it feels as though the campaigns for and against are gathering pace. Last week a number of business leaders wrote to The Times to argue that Britain is stronger in Europe, among them was Sir Richard Branson, founder, of course, of the Virgin Group. He told me why he thinks it would be madness to leave the EU.

RICHARD BRANSON:
If I may, I’ll go back to 50 years when I started in business. I had a record company; if I wanted to export my music into Europe, I paid 35% tax. If I wanted to import music from Europe, I paid 35% tax. If I wanted to set up an office in Europe, it was extremely difficult. If I wanted to put people from the UK into Europe to work in my office, it was just extremely difficult. There just wasn’t this wonderful situation that we have at the moment where there’s this enormous trading block, you can treat it just as though it’s the UK, trade anywhere within Europe. So how anyone would want to go back to the days where all these barriers were put up, I just find it inconceivable.

ANDREW MARR:
I suppose one of the issues however is our trade deficit with Europe, it’s £48 billion at the moment plus the £12 billion entrance fee, that’s £60 billion it’s costing us to be in Europe and for a lot of people, that is just a price that is too high.
RICHARD BRANSON:
I think people need to remember that the whole of the EU administration put together has no more people than the number of people who run a city like Birmingham. A lot of these other costs is money that comes back into the countries of Europe and is used to benefit those countries. I mean, we’ve now got a trading block that is equivalent to the size of America and we’re on an equal footing when we’re negotiating trade deals or airline deals or…you know, we’re talking from a position of strength. If we go back to being Great Britain again, we will have our hands tied behind or back and I think Europeans will rightly punish us and we’ll be back to where we were fifty years ago.

ANDREW MARR:
In your businesses, you must employ a lot of people from other parts of the EU as employees, what do you think, therefore, about the proposal that they should have some of their tax rights and tax credits removed in order to prevent higher immigration into the UK from the rest of the EU?

RICHARD BRANSON:
Look, if they need to tinker with one or two of these things in order to make sure that we don’t do something more catastrophic like leaving Europe, that’s fine by me. I think there are much bigger issues that I’m concerned about. When I was a young man at the dinner table, my father would talk about the five years he spent fighting the Italians and fighting the Germans, and I remember my Grandfather talking about being gassed in the trenches, we’re the first generation that haven’t been to war in Europe and this, to me, is even more important. By being part of a big trading block, you know, we spend time with each other, we marry each other, we live in each other’s countries, we’re not going to go to war with each other.

ANDREW MARR:
And yet, there’s clearly something fundamental going wrong inside the EU at the moment, I’m thinking of Greece, and the possible Grexit. The pressure that the Euro has put on all those southern economies to either cut back brutally or pull out of the entire thing. I mean you were a great for the Euro once, so are you now pleased that we are staying out of it?
RICHARD BRANSON:
Not particularly. I think if we were part of the Euro right now, our currency would be a lot cheaper. Great Britain would be doing that much better at trading in Europe. Because the Pound is a lot stronger than the Euro, it makes it more difficult for us. I mean, Greece has got problems because it overspent, it hasn’t run into difficulties because it’s part of Europe.

ANDREW MARR:
For most of my adult lifetime, you have been the face of the Virgin group of companies. You have done a great job at selling your companies. Do you think you can do the same kind of thing to sell Europe to people?

RICHARD BRANSON:
I doubt I’ll be taking a lead role. I mean all I can do is do the occasional interview to say why I’m…

ANDREW MARR:
You won’t be on a soap box?

RICHARD BRANSON:
No I’m not going to be on a soap box. I’ve avoided politics and I’m not going to start now. But, I’m very happy just to say why we should be proud of being Europeans and, I mean, each European country is trying to improve Europe, that’s much better to do from within Europe than from without.

ANDREW MARR:
Sir Richard Branson, thank you very much for joining us.

RICHARD BRANSON:
Thank you very much.