ANDREW MARR:  
We may be only hours away from the draft deal between David Cameron and the rest of the EU on the terms of the negotiation which will fire the starting gun for our in-out European referendum. For those who want to leave the EU, the current polling isn’t very reassuring. Luke Johnson is the leading business advocate for Vote Leave, one of the competing Brexit campaigns. Before we get onto that, Luke, you’ve been a big critic of Google. What did you make of what Peter Barron was saying just now?

LUKE JOHNSON:  
Well I thought it was very confusing and I thought it confirmed to me that Google organises its affairs so as to avoid tax. And considering the chairman of Google claims that they operate to the highest ethical standards, I find that hypocritical.

ANDREW MARR:  
As somebody who runs many businesses in the UK paying full whack corporation tax on everything, what do you think of the idea that corporation tax itself has become unfit for purpose and we need a thorough revision of business taxation in this country?
LUKE JOHNSON:
I agree with that and I think our 17,000 page tax code is far too long and complex and it creates these loopholes. So I think the entire thing needs rethinking and I think corporation tax doesn’t work as it’s currently structured.

ANDREW MARR:
Let’s move onto Europe then. David Cameron has his negotiations with Mr Tusk later on today and the briefing is that he’s going to get or he’s trying to get an emergency brake on in-work benefits for migrants which might last for 7 years until the whole thing can be renegotiated. Is that the kind of breakthrough that would make you change your mind about leaving the EU?

LUKE JOHNSON:
No, I think it’s relatively trivial and I’m afraid to say that I think the negotiations of supposed reforms that Cameron is attempting at the moment are effectively condescending to us because they’re a device, they’re not going to lead to much change, and I fear it’s not going to address the fundamental issues such as ending ever closer union that the EU is committed to.

ANDREW MARR:
The Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, has said that leaving the EU would cause a flight of capital, it would cause interest rates to go up and lots of economic chaos to this country. Why is he wrong?

LUKE JOHNSON:
If you look back a few years ago when there was a debate about whether we should join the euro, those that said that sterling was finished and that if we didn’t join the euro Britain’s economy would be doomed were proved utterly wrong; and very many of the same voices are raised now saying that if we leave the EU we’re doomed. And I think that they should not talk down our national interests. I think Britain is the fifth largest economy in the world, the city is the leading financial centre in the world. We have a great independent future just as countries like Norway and Switzerland enjoy.
ANDREW MARR:
Are you concerned that David Cameron is trying to as it were bounce the country into an early referendum in June? He’s got a poll lead at the moment, he’s going to come out with this big negotiation success perhaps, and that in a way the Brexit campaign is being pushed to the side by the steamroller of the establishment?

LUKE JOHNSON:
I think that is going on and that’s why I think it’s important that both sides of the argument are heard. The reason why we’re having a referendum is because this is a democracy and I think it’s important that people are informed and decide for themselves whether they think the current system works, whether it’s good for our economy and our culture or our society, or whether we deserve the freedom and independence of continuing successfully outside the EU.

ANDREW MARR:
Now you’ve said in the past that one of the problems you have as an employer is that too many of your employees are kind of amateur lawyers with an inflated sense of their own burgeoning rights. A lot of people would say the point of the EU is that it has given workers more rights and that’s a good thing.

LUKE JOHNSON:
Yes but what’s important in life is that people get good jobs. And the EU has generally speaking in its existence been a job destruction machine and the fact that many countries in the EU, for example, have much higher levels of unemployment is demonstration that the EU isn’t necessarily very effective at creating jobs and this country is.

ANDREW MARR:
We’re seeing the collapse of the Schengen Agreement, borders going up all over the EU, huge rows inside the EU about migration and about economics. Do you think we’re seeing the end of the EU?

LUKE JOHNSON:
I think it could break up and I think new collaborations will have to then arise. We’ll have to see. But certainly I think it’s facing, with the possible departure of Britain and the collapse of the Schengen Agreement, the biggest threats to its existence for many years.

ANDREW MARR:
On the Brexit side, there are now competing campaigns. I think there’s three competing campaigns. This is your one chance probably in your lifetime and in my lifetime to get Britain out of the EU. Isn’t it totally depressing that the Brexit side is fighting amongst itself – there’s been this report of a coup against Dominic Cummings, who’s the Conservative adviser, leading Vote Leave and so forth? What’s your take on that?

LUKE JOHNSON:
I’m nothing to do with any of the organisation of these campaigns. I’m merely an individual with my personal views about our economy and the prospects for the EU. And, as far as I’m concerned, I’m a businessman and I think we should look at the facts and not get involved in the politics of which campaign is which and focus on is the EU good for Britain or not.

ANDREW MARR:
Now you’ve created a lot of jobs in your time through Pizza Express and many other businesses. Are you convinced that outside the EU you would be able to create more jobs than if we stay in?

LUKE JOHNSON:
I’m convinced that Britain is a very viable economy. We attract record levels of foreign direct investment. We actually export less to the EU than they export to us. They need us and I think we will have a very viable and successful time outside the EU.

ANDREW MARR:
And to win this battle, what’s most important? Is it to talk about immigration and migration or is it to talk about our economic future outside the EU?
LUKE JOHNSON:
I think all the aspects of the EU matter and I think that what’s good about this debate and the referendum is that it gives a chance for both sides to set up their camps and explain to the public what the benefits and deficits of the EU are and decide for themselves, and I think it’s democracy in action and I think it’s very healthy.

ANDREW MARR:
Luke Johnson, thank you very much indeed for coming in to talk to us this morning.

INTERVIEW ENDS