INTERVIEW WITH:
HARRIET HARMAN, MP, DEPUTY LEADER, LABOUR PARTY

MARR: If the local election results are reliable indicators, Ed Miliband's hopes of winning next year's general election have been gravely undermined by the surge of UKIP. Traditional Labour strongholds fell to Nigel Farage's candidates, leaving Mr Miliband with a major problem in terms of wooing back disaffected voters. But many say the problem starts with the leader himself. His deputy, Harriet Harman, joins me now. Welcome. Do you have an Ed Miliband problem in your Party?

HARMAN: Well, you know, I really disagree with the way that you framed it there. You know the reality is, obviously, we all know that there's many people who feel really disaffected from politics and alienated from politics and in a way, I think that UKIP have benefited from that. But it's not true to say that we're all in the same boat and that Labour is facing difficulties. I mean, what I've got to do when I get in to the office next week, is sit down and write three hundred letters to candidates who are now councillors who have won their seats and actually, we've won more votes than the other Parties and we've actually won more councillors than all the other Parties put together. (interjection) ... I can't answer a question about how bad things are for Ed Miliband and the Labour Party. No, because actually compared to the other Parties, we are moving forward. I do agree with the point that there is major disaffection and I think UKIP has actually benefited from that. They're not the answer to that. We've got to find the answer to that. But actually, you know, I'm going to be congratulating our candidates when the Tories and the Lib Dems are going to be writing condolence letters.

MARR: There was an argument running for quite a long time, inside the Labour Party, that UKIP was a big problem for the Tories, it was a kind of family split on the right, it had nothing to do with the Labour Party. What these results show comprehensively is that's not true. (interjection) You can lose to UKIP.

HARMAN: No, we never said that and the idea that we sat back and said, oh UKIP, the rise of that Party is a good thing because it split the vote on the right of politics. You know, that is not what we said. What we said is we have to address the underlying causes of concern that people have that lead them to say, and I mean I, you know, I faced people on the doorstep in the election, where they would look me straight in the eye and say, well actually, normally I'm a Labour supporter but I'm not going to vote for you, I'm going to vote for
UKIP because I think you need a shake up. So basically, it’s not a pro-UKIP vote, it’s like an anti politics, you got to get your act together vote and we’re listening to that and dealing with the issues that they’re raising which is about people’s standard of living, their hope for the future, the sense that they’ve got a part in the future of Britain.

MARR: You don’t think it’s to do with immigration.

HARMAN: Well, I think immigration is part and parcel of people’s concerns that they feel as if they’re working hard, that their pay is stagnating. It’s difficult for them to get a home. They, they are concerned about those things and that’s why the issues that we’ve put forward like preventing agencies, exclusively bringing in employees from Poland rather than recruiting people here. Failing to train young people, so that they can get the jobs. Those are really important issues.

MARR: If I may say so, here is the problem. You say that you’re listening to these people and you accepted immigration for instance is one of the things and when we go on to that, you then site policies you’ve already announced. So can I ask you. You’ve heard a message, you’ve listened to people. What are you going to do that’s going to be different. Where are you going to change as a result.

HARMAN: Well, I think it’s two things. It’s not only listening to people and making it absolutely clear to them that we understand those concerns. I think that was one of the very important things people were wanting to say – you’ve got to listen to us, we are really concerned. But more than that, we have to actually give them the confidence that in the Labour Party, we’ve got the solution to those problems. It’s not just enough to listen.

MARR: No.

HARMAN: It’s about the solutions and we’ve got to re-build the confidence which has been eroded for some time. Not in the most immediate past, but for some time... (interjection)

MARR: In the Labour Party.

HARMAN: Well, no, in the whole political process. Since the MPs expenses., since the global financial crisis, people are thinking, can any of this lot really help with our problems and I think Ed Miliband for example, is the only party leader that actually cognises that people were having trouble making ends meet and talked about the cost of living. So he’s been in touch with people’s concerns and we now need to build their confidence.

MARR: So having listening and listened and listened, is there a single policy you’re going to change as a result of all of this listening, or do you carry on as before.

HARMAN: Well, you know, it’s not just abstract listening, it’s listening, showing you’re doing that and also developing those policies. We’ve developed
policies on ensuring that people’s rents don’t go through the roof, that their fuel bills are frozen, that there’s more homes and are you saying, have we finished policy development – no, we haven’t. No we’ve definitely … (interjection)

MARR: These are policies in the past … (interjection)

BOTH TOGETHER

HARMAN: … yeah, and they were good policies and we’re going to develop more policies in the future. Actually freezing people’s fuel bills, proposing that, that was not a bad policy. Tackling soaring rents, that’s a good policy, but we need more policies and we also need to be able to … (interjection)

MARR: Anything on immigration, anything on Europe?

HARMAN: Well, I think the question of ensuring that people’s pay is not undercut by people coming in from Europe and elsewhere in the world and actually making people feel as if though they’ve working hard, their cost of living is slipping back. I mean that’s why people are concerned, because their prospects for the future, they feel are threatened and their standard of living is stagnating or going back and we have to address that … (interjection) … whilst keeping England and the UK to be a global, outward facing economy.

MARR: We read this morning that the Conservatives want much tougher policies to penalise employers who aren’t paying minimum wage, that’s I think something that the Labour Party has also talked about in the past. Is that something you would welcome if it was brought to the House of Commons.

HARMAN: Well, I, you know, excuse me for just remembering that the Tories were against the minimum wage in the first place and secondly, have not been in favour of enforcing it; so you know, if they’re repenting on that, good thing too. Yes, it is important to have a floor under wages and it’s important to have them effectively enforced as well and more than that, one of the things Ed Miliband has been arguing for is a living wage, which is making sure that we use the power of public policy to ensure that pay moves forward rather than stagnates.

MARR: Your own colleagues, your own candidates have been saying over the past twelve hours that Ed Miliband has been an issue on the doorstep. Are you saying they’re all completely wrong and they’ve picked up something that isn’t there or do you think there is something there that can be sorted.

HARMAN: Well, I think that with three hundred new councillors, they would be baffled by the idea that we should think that we all had to be turning inward and criticising ourselves and secondly, as far as the public is concerned, us turning inwards and having self-criticism is not a good idea. We have to be listening to their concerns and acting on them. And as I say, I’ve got to beetle off and sign those letters, congratulating the councillors, whilst Grant Shapps and the Tories, will have to write and say, I’m awfully sorry that you’ve lost your seat.
MARR: I will let you beetle in just a moment but I have to come back. All the polling shows that Ed is less popular than the Party by quite a margin and a third of Labour supporters who prefer to have David Cameron as Prime Minister than Ed Miliband. That suggests there is something here, even if you don’t want to sort of face up to it and acknowledge it this morning.

HARMAN: Well, you know, I’m all for facing up to and acknowledging everything but you know, you can’t just look at every different nuanced opinion poll. The fact of the matter is, is that even from opposition, Ed Miliband has actually changed the political agenda, because the Tories and the Lib Dems did not even want to discuss the fact that there was a problem of the cost of living. They’re busy saying there’s a recovery and not recognizing that many people, despite the recovery, feel that the recovery has not come to their front door. So, actually ... (interjection)

MARR: Nothing to do with the presentational issue of the Leader, it’s entirely policy driven ... (interjection)

HARMAN: It, it – we’ve got since the General – since 2010, when Ed Miliband became leader, we have had the momentum of moving forward when people are actually voting. So we had even before these election results, one thousand nine hundred and fifty more Labour councillors. So the momentum is there and for a Party Leader ... (interjection)

MARR: On the basis of results, I’m sorry to interrupt, but on the basis of the results we’ve seen over the last few hours, you are not on course to win an overall majority at the next election, which you have to win to govern properly.

HARMAN: Well, I think the predictions about what these elections mean for 2015 are very hard to make because we’re in quite an unprecedented situation, with the Tories and the Lib Dems in coalition, with UKIP having moved forward. I think the idea of easy predictions on the basis of the past, is for the birds. What we do know is the facts. The facts are, we are moving forward. The facts are that Ed Miliband is touch with people’s concerns and that we’re putting forward those policies. So I’m sorry I’m not being able to be here to tear my hair out and agree with you that we are emerging blinking from the rubble. I think that’s, that might be the case with the other parties, but it’s not the case for us. There are concerns and we’re determined to address them.

MARR: Harriet Harman, for now, I will let you beetle off and write those letters. Thank you very much indeed for joining us.

END OF INTERVIEW WITH HARRIET HARMAN.