ANDREW MARR:
The Liberal Democrats have a direct role in government of course for the first time since … well since the party was founded. However, their individual identity and their separate policies have been, I think it’s fair to say, rather overshadowed by the Conservatives who form the larger part of the coalition. The most outspoken Lib Dem sitting at the cabinet table, a man quite prepared to lock horns with the Prime Minister or the Chancellor, was the Energy Secretary Chris Huhne, so what does his departure to prepare for his court appearance mean for his party and the government? The President of the Lib Dems, Tim Farron, is in Cumbria. Good morning, Tim. It looks formidably cold there, so thank you for coming out.

TIM FARRON:
Oh this is normal, Andrew.

ANDREW MARR:
Okay. Let me start with some politics as normal. A lot of hostility building up for instance to wind farms at the moment, one of Chris Huhne’s key policies. Do you think that his departure from government is going to blunt the climate change agenda that the Liberal Democrats have been so enthusiastic about?
TIM FARRON:
Well no, it definitely isn’t. Ed Davey is an outstanding environmentalist and one with years track record in fighting on green issues - absolutely the right person to take over in the job. That doesn’t mean we won’t miss Chris Huhne. We will. In fact the whole government will miss Chris Huhne. I’ve seen many plaudits from the likes of Greenpeace and from the World Wildlife Fund paying tribute to Chris’s work. That doesn’t happen normally when an Energy and Environment Secretary steps down. So certainly Chris will be missed, but in Ed Davey we have somebody who is very formidable. I mean remember he’s just come from the Business Department where he saw through the Royal Mail reforms. Michael Heseltine and Peter Mandelson couldn’t get the Royal Mail reforms through the House of Commons. Ed Davey did. He’s a very, very capable man and we will be finding a lot more about him in the coming days. You know that.

ANDREW MARR:
Well you said that the whole government would miss Chris Huhne. I’m not sure if that’s right. There’s lots and lots of Conservatives jumping up and down with glee about the fact that Chris Huhne has gone. And one of the reasons for that was that this was one of the most outspoken and, if you like, rough house political fighters on your side of the coalition. Him not being there weakens the Lib Dem voice, surely?

TIM FARRON:
No. Look, I mean absolutely none of us, not even you or I are indispensable when it comes down to it. We’ll miss Chris for the duration that he’s away and I hope he’ll be back fairly soon, but in any event what matters is that we work together as a government. I mean I think it is important that the Liberal Democrats flex our muscles and we demonstrate our separate identity, but I also think it’s important we behave in a collegiate manner, that we are distinctive but not destructive. What is important to most people watching this programme is that we get out of the appalling economic mess we’ve been left by Labour; and that means that whilst Lib Dems and Tories have got very little in common, one thing we have in common is a resolute desire to make sure we make a coalition government work. And I mean this is the third in nearly two years now, third resignation from the cabinet. This makes this probably the
most stable government in living memory, which is I think counterintuitive to many people who thought that coalition government would be some kind of shambles and it’s been anything but.

ANDREW MARR:
It’s certainly … I don’t know whether it’s counterintuitive. It’s certainly confusing. I mean you just said that Liberal Democrats and Conservatives have “very little in common”, and yet you’re having this terribly successful coalition.

TIM FARRON:
(over) Well politically and ideologically, but we can still work together.

ANDREW MARR:
Well so you’ve got little in common politically …

TIM FARRON:
(over) Politically and ideol…

ANDREW MARR:
(over) … but you’re a successful coalition. How does that happen? How does that work?

TIM FARRON:
Because we behave like grown-ups, you behave like grown-ups. What does everybody else do in their normal everyday lives? They get on with people, they’re polite to people, they compromise with people they don’t necessarily agree eye to eye with. And that’s the way this coalition works. I mean I’m somebody who is absolutely definitely not a Tory, but I don’t see why I shouldn’t work with the likes of David Cameron and Eric Pickles to try and make things better for our country. We’ve been left a set of arithmetic in a hung parliament after the last election, which meant that only one option was available, which was a Liberal Democrat Conservative majority, so you can either whinge about it or you can get your sleeves rolled up and make sure that the thing works.
ANDREW MARR:
The result of this adult, grown-up behaviour for your party has been a really serious slump in the polls, which must worry all of you. So how do you now start to make the Liberal Democrat case more distinctively while still being in that cabinet?

TIM FARRON:
Well you don’t panic for one thing. I mean if you look at our opinion polls ratings recently - and of course we all do; even though we pretend we don’t care, we do care - but the last one I saw, which was the ICM poll last week, 16 per cent, if we get any higher than that, we’ll get nosebleeds. I mean we’re actually doing an awful lot better than people assume we are. We seem to be talking about a set of circumstances which were perhaps the case six months ago. So the Liberal Democrats undoubtedly have taken a hit though, but if you look at local council by-elections, opinion polls and a whole range of other indicators - a very clear sense the Lib Dems are recovering. Our opinion poll rating now is actually slightly higher than it would be normally in mid-term. That doesn’t mean we haven’t taken a hit - we clearly have - but you don’t panic. You work hard, you try and make sure you demonstrate your identity by doing things like ensuring you get fair taxes, stopping the lowest paid paying any income tax at all, preventing the Tories giving tax cuts to millionaires through inheritance tax and making sure that Trident is not replaced by an expensive and aggressive new nuclear system.

ANDREW MARR:
So what are …

TIM FARRON:
(over) So we’re making a real difference in government.

ANDREW MARR:
Sure. So what’s the fresh agenda to emphasise that difference? What would you like to see Liberal Democrats talking more about over the year or two ahead that will make people think about them differently?

TIM FARRON:
Well you saw … Yeah, you saw Nick Clegg just a couple of weeks ago pushing very, very hard for an extension and a speeding up of our successful plan so far to take the lowest paid out of paying any income tax whatsoever. That was our top line promise at the last General Election and it’s a promise we’ve delivered. We want to deliver it quicker …

**ANDREW MARR:**

*(over)* So progressive taxation?

**TIM FARRON:**

*(over)* … and I think some of us would like to deliver it further. But absolutely, I mean at a time like …

**ANDREW MARR:**

*(over)* Progressive taxation is central. What else?

**TIM FARRON:**

*(over)* Not only is that … Because not only is that fair; it’s also quite sensible. If you think about it, at a time … I am a Keynesian and I think you know boosting demand in the economy is a good thing to do, but you can do that by cutting taxes for the least well paid. Without wanting to be too flippant, if you give tax cuts to the wealthy, they either spend it in Tuscany or they save it. If you give it to the least well off, they spend it and it’s good for our economy. So doing that. Pushing forward on the Green agenda. Ed Davey’s arrival in Energy and Climate Change means it’s so important that we carry on now to push out the Green Investment Bank, the Green Deal - making sure that not only are we trying to save the planet, but actually using the Green agenda to create new jobs. But it’s also very, very important that we make sure that politics is open and accessible to people and we are, for example, pushing forward the reform in the House of Lords. We’re making sure that we have a democracy that is at least fit for the 20th century.

**ANDREW MARR:**

And Chris Huhne himself says that he is not guilty of any of these charges. You’re crossing your fingers for him. You think he’ll be vindicated and he’ll be back in
TIM FARRON:
Yeah, I very much hope so. I mean he is a real talent, Chris. I mean I’m telling you that the government is not destabilised by this, the Lib Dems are not pushed off track by this, but of course we miss him. He is an outstanding performer. The very fact that he could cope with this sort of eight or nine months worth of personal pressure that he’s been under. I’m sure I would have cracked, but he has been able to compartmentalise and be an absolutely outstanding member of cabinet and has been you know given plaudits by all the Green organisations as being the most successful Energy and Climate Change Secretary we’ve ever had. More successful than the last one who’s now Leader of the Labour Party, of course …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) And you expect …

TIM FARRON:
(over) … and that’s massively to his credit and we want to see him back quickly.

ANDREW MARR:
And you expect him to be back as well as wanting to see him back?

TIM FARRON:
Both: I want and expect him back, yes.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright. Tim Farron, thank you very much indeed for joining us from snowy Cumbria. Thank you.

TIM FARRON:
Thank you, Andrew.

INTERVIEW ENDS