EDDIE MAIR: As Labour prepares to launch its Local Election campaign for England and Wales tomorrow, the Party’s Deputy Leader, Harriet Harman is here. You’re very welcome. Good morning.

HARRIET HARMAN: Good morning.

EDDIE MAIR: Let’s look at one of these polls, YouGov in the Sun today saying, 67% believe the welfare system doesn’t work and needs urgent reform. Do you agree with that majority?

HARRIET HARMAN: Well, I think it’s not surprising that people feel very concerned about the situation, because you’ve got a twin problem: you’ve got an economy which is stagnating, which is not growing and so not generating jobs, and you also don’t have a proper work programme so that people can be offered a job and if they don’t take it, their benefits are docked. The difficulty is for people who are in work, seeing their standard of living pressurized, understandably, they feel very resentful for people who are not working. For people who are looking for a job and can’t find work, it’s deeply frustrating. And then of course for the small minority who don’t want to work, well they’re left off the hook by the fact that there isn’t a proper work programme. So I think it’s very understandable that people feel the way they do but instead of just being divisive about it, which is what the Government is doing and allowing the economy to stagnate, they should actually be supporting the economy in to growth and also having a proper work programme, with a job’s guarantee, which is what we’ve been suggesting.

EDDIE MAIR: According to these polls, people have very specific ideas about things they support in this Sun poll. 8 out of 10 support a £26,000 a year limit on what
families can receive. More than half want pensioners’ winter fuel allowance to be means-tested.

HARRIET HARMAN: Well, I think the difficulty with the winter fuel allowance is that, and the reason why we brought it in as a universal benefit, which was at the outset of the Labour government in 1997, was there was a real problem of pensioner poverty. And we introduced the Minimum Income Guarantee to help uplift those – the income of the poorest pensioners and we also introduced the winter fuel payment, not least because means tested benefits tend not to be particularly well-claimed by pensioners; so if you want to reach pensioners it’s easier to do it through a universal provision because there’s an unwillingness of pensioners to claim means-tested benefits. Also, because so many pensioners are not well off, when you cost the administration of doing a means-tested benefit, compared to the amount of people who then wouldn’t get it, it hardly is worth it, to means-test it. But yes, obviously these things all need to be looked at, on a continuous basis.

EDDIE MAIR: Well I want to spend a little time just testing where Labour now is on welfare. In an article in the Guardian this week, entitled ‘Labour must draw the sting from welfare or lose in 2015’, Jonathan Freedland, no right winger, put forward this conundrum for the Party and I want to put it to you. ‘Should it attempt the daunting task of shifting public opinion, persuading the voters that they’re wrong, their views built on prejudice’, the sort of figures I was giving you a moment ago, or ‘accept that the people are where they are and try to meet them there’. What are you going to do? Which of those options?

HARRIET HARMAN: Well I’m not sure that it’s a political calculation like that, or at least I don’t think it should be. I think we should actually say what we believe is the problem with the economy and the stagnation of the economy and put forward our plan to actually push the economy back in to growth, which is what we’ve done. And also ... (interjection)

EDDIE MAIR: But people want to know what you think on Welfare and these very ... (interjection)

HARRIET HARMAN: But you see these things are combined because if the economy is not growing then welfare takes up a larger proportion as a percentage of national income.

EDDIE MAIR: That’s understood ... (interjection)

HARRIET HARMAN: But also ... (interjection)

EDDIE MAIR: ... but you can tell me where the Party stands on principle on some of these key welfare planks but you’re not doing that.

HARRIET HARMAN: No, I am because what I’m saying is that there’s two things that need to be done. The economy needs to be growing and there’s a responsibility for the government to change course because they’ve been failing on the economy ... (interjection)

EDDIE MAIR: You’ve made that point.
HARRIET HARMAN: ... but also, because of the issue in relation to unemployment, what the government should be doing is making sure that they have a proper work programme, not just generating, not just ... (interjection)

EDDIE MAIR: Sure. We have limited time and you’ve most articulately explained that. Could you deal with my question, which is Jonathan Freedland’s question. (interjection)

HARRIET HARMAN: Yes, but ... (interjection)

EDDIE MAIR: Do you say to the public, ‘you’re wrong on welfare, you’re wrong on this business of scroungers and so on’?

HARRIET HARMAN: No, we say to the public that in terms of unemployment, we do have a proposal, a proposal which could be financed without additional borrowing, which is that if you’ve been unemployed for more than two years, that there is a job provided for you and have to take it. It would be at minimum wage level and provide additional training, but you have to take it and if you don’t your benefits are docked and for a young person, then that comes in after a year. And we’ve shown how we can finance that for adults unemployed, for people over twenty five, through a cut in the pension tax relief for people on over a £150,000. And also for young people, we pay for that by taxing bankers’ bonuses because what you can’t have is a situation where people feel they’re getting worse off and feel resentful about people who aren’t working and people who aren’t working who don’t want to work, are left off the hook because there aren’t the jobs for them to go for. So you have to have a growing economy and a proper work programme.

EDDIE MAIR: Let me ask you about some possible things you could do. Should people on benefits be allowed to have as many children as they want?

HARRIET HARMAN: Well I, you know it’s absolutely understandable when people limit their families to one or two children and feel they’d like to have third but they can’t afford it, the exasperation that people feel for the very small number of very large families that there are. But if you think of the Philpott family example, I mean that was not really a, I think above all, that was a problem of somebody who was just a criminal, a controlling person who was abusing everyone in their family as well as abusing the system and fraud should be clamped down on, there’s no doubt that that. He was taking the benefits ... (interjection)

EDDIE MAIR: But in terms of numbers, should the State, no matter how many children an individual wants to have, should the State always provide for them?

HARRIET HARMAN: I don’t think that the State should be dictating family size but I do think that the State should support children. If children are in a bad situation, it’s the responsibility of the State to take them in to care. (interjection) ....

EDDIE MAIR: So seventeen children is fine, the State will continue to cough up for them.
HARRIET HARMAN: Well I don’t think it’s fine. I don’t think anybody thinks what was going on in that family was acceptable ....

EDDIE MAIR: I’m not talking about just this family ... (interjection)

HARRIET HARMAN: ... not least because of the violence.

EDDIE MAIR: What about limiting child benefit to the first two children?

HARRIET HARMAN: Well I think that there have been, for example in France, in order to try and encourage women to have children, they actually increased the amount of child benefit per child. I think it - rather than trying to encourage women to have children or discourage them from having children, I think it’s important to actually support children who are born into a family, also to make sure that women and men are in a position to make proper choices about their families. That means birth control, that means women being able to make decisions for themselves and not like in the Philpott case being oppressed in to having so many children.

EDDIE MAIR: Well you see it’s difficult isn’t it because on these key questions about benefits for lots of children and limiting child benefit, which some Conservatives are talking about, you don’t want to do that. Isn’t the difficulty that when Labour gets in to office, you’ve got Liam Bryne today, flying a few kites about possible changes to welfare. When Labour gets in to office, it really struggles to make significant changes to welfare. You were Social Security Secretary when Labour came to power in 1997, you introduced a Bill cutting benefits for single parent families and what happened when you did that? Did your Party back you? No. Forty seven Labour MPs voted against you. One hundred abstained. One Minister and two Parliamentary Private Secretaries resigned and a Ministerial Aide was sacked ahead of the vote. Labour doesn’t change welfare does it? And you’ve got the scars on your back to prove it.

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HARRIET HARMAN: Well we did change welfare. One of the things that we did is brought in the New Deals, which were very tough on ensuring that there was work for people, but said that they had an obligation to take that work. For example, we brought in a New Deal for lone parents. Previously, you’d been able to claim income support until your youngest child was sixteen... (interjection)

EDDIE MAIR: Why did all these people vote against it?

HARRIET HARMAN: Well hang on. We said that actually, that was not only bad for the Welfare Bill, but it was bad for children to be brought up in a family where they never see anyone going out to work. So that was very controversial, but we did bring in the New Deal for lone parents, which was a combination of tax credits to make work pay, child care, but also an obligation to work. And now you see, Eddie, that is agreed that that was a Labour welfare reform, it was regarded as very controversial in those days. But we didn’t want to see children brought up in workless households, even where that household was headed by a lone parent. So we did reform welfare in that respect.

EDDIE MAIR: What is Liam Bryne talking about?
HARRIET HARMAN: Well he's talking about three principles which we're working on, up to the General Election. As I said, we've got our plans for now on our Job Guarantee, that I've explained to you. But we're also, ahead of the General Election, putting forward three principles. One that work should pay. Secondly, there should be an obligation to take work. And thirdly, that there should be support through a contributory principle, for people putting in to the system as well as taking out and I think that's the discussion and the debate that we're engaging in up to the General Election but it doesn't mean there's a policy vacuum now. We have very clear views on what the government should be doing to support the economy and very clear views about them having a job guarantee, in order that people shouldn't be able to say, 'well I've tried for a job but I just haven't been able to get one'.

EDDIE MAIR: Tell me a bit more about this varying contribution that Liam Byrne is talking about.

HARRIET HARMAN: Well I mean, I think for example, some councils are already, some Labour councils are already looking at how they do their housing allocation by virtue of whether people contribute to the local economy through their work, or contribute through community work. But this is a discussion ...

EDDIE MAIR: Scroungers go to the bottom of the list.

HARRIET HARMAN: Well, this is a discussion which is underway and you know, it will come to fruition in what we put forward for our manifesto ...

EDDIE MAIR: You can see why people say there's a policy vacuum can't you because you're still talking about the policies.

HARRIET HARMAN: Well, except that we are saying, you know and I don't think scroungers and that sort of language is particularly helpful but I do think that the government should, right now, be introducing a work programme so that those people who want to work and the overwhelming majority of unemployed people are desperate to work, not just for the money but because of the self respect that work brings, so that there is work for people to do and so that people who don't want to work are not able to say, 'well I've tried but I can't find work' and then that causes real resentment from people who are in work and are struggling to make ends meet.

EDDIE MAIR: And if people pay more in they'll get more back?

HARRIET HARMAN: Well, I think that, you know, some benefits obviously are contributory like contributory employment support allowance ...

EDDIE MAIR: But that's what Liam Byrne is talking about.

HARRIET HARMAN: Yeah, there's a combination of benefits and services, you know like getting council housing, there's a combination of benefits which are, some of them are universal and some are means-tested. And the point is to get the balance right. But I think above all at the moment, we've got to make sure we tackle the problem of people feeling they're working all hours to make ends meet and some people are not pulling their weight and actually, they're being allowed off the hook.
because the economy is stagnating and there’s no proper work programme. And the government could be doing that right now.

EDDIE MAIR: Quick final thought. Do you agree with Tony Blair, that the election would have been tighter if he’d been leader in 2010?

HARRIET HARMAN: Well, I’m not sure that looking back on that and making observations helps. I think our focus is on the 2015 election and we’ve got a very difficult job to do ... (interjects)

EDDIE MAIR: Good answer.

HARRIET HARMAN: ... to get in next time.

EDDIE MAIR: All right. Thank you very much for that. Nice to see you, Harriet Harman.

END OF INTERVIEW