JAMES LANDALE:
Last year's local elections were a bit of a low point for the Lib Dems, so it’s perhaps not surprising that ahead of next month’s polls they’re trying to assert their authority and independence within the coalition. The latest disagreement is over government plans to extend internet surveillance and secret courts, but is this flexing of the party muscles enough to win back support? The Party President, Tim Farron, joins us now from his home in Cumbria. Tim Farron, welcome, good morning.

TIM FARRON:
Good morning, James.

JAMES LANDALE:
You said in your party’s website this weekend that we should be prepared to “put our foot down and pull the plug” on these changes to the surveillance laws and the plans for secret courts. Does that mean you want to kill them outright and not just amend them?
TIM FARRON:
Well it's important to be reasonable and look at the draft legislation, as it now will be, not an outright bill, and see what it says and look at it on its merits, but I have to say I'm in no mood whatsoever to kind of apologise for or to amend or unpick authoritarian legislation. It strikes me that a Liberal Democrat or a government that includes Liberal Democrats should ensure that Britain ends up a more liberal place, not less; and, like many of us who are Liberals, very horrified by the original press reports about what the surveillance measures might lead to. There must be absolutely no question of universal internet surveillance across this country.

JAMES LANDALE:
But it’s … Sorry, let me be very clear. Are you going to oppose these measures as currently outlined in the green paper and currently reported, or will you try to amend them or do you want to just kill them outright?

TIM FARRON:
Well let’s see what it says, first of all. When the thing comes out, we can see the detail …

JAMES LANDALE:
(over) So you’re not prepared to compromise?

TIM FARRON:
Then I’ll want to see … Well I’m prepared to recognise that there are … obviously there’s a need in a modern society with new technology to have a look at what needs to be given to the security services, but only if it’s absolutely clear there is no universal access. But we are prepared to be kill them - I mean be absolutely clear about that - if it comes down to it. If we think this is a threat to a free and liberal society, then there’ll be no question of unpicking them or compromising. This just simply must not happen.

JAMES LANDALE:
Is this a good way to make legislation - public debate, public division, messy
compromise just like the Health Bill?

TIM FARRON:
Well I think actually what you’re seeing is the good side of coalition politics. What happened in the last government is you’d have an unofficial coalition between Blair and Brown where there would be desperately unpleasant sort of personal disagreements that were all buried beneath the surface but of course we all found about them. What you get in the coalition is honest debate upfront, which is actually not that personal. It’s not aimed at individuals; it’s about issues and differences of opinion. It shouldn’t come as a surprise to you or to anybody else, James, that Liberal Democrats and Conservatives think very different things; and whilst there are some people like David Davis in the Tory Party who have you know liberal instincts, I have to say they are in a minority and it will be up to Liberal Democrats to fight the corner for freedom and for liberal values in this coalition.

JAMES LANDALE:
The Home Secretary Theresa May said in the Sunday Telegraph this morning that there will be a bill in the Queen’s speech. It will be a bill - not a draft bill, but a bill that will be introduced and passed in the next session of parliament.

TIM FARRON:
Well it’s interesting to hear her say that. I would be very surprised if we ended up in a situation where any bill that looked anything like the press reports that were talked about earlier this week got anywhere near the House of Commons; and if it did, then Liberal Democrats would not support it. But I don’t think that is what’s going to happen. My conversations with the Deputy Prime Minister and others reveal that there’s been significant movement this week. I suspect a lot of the reports are exaggerated, but if they weren’t then no such bill should get anywhere near the House of Commons.

JAMES LANDALE:
We’re discussing this on the day that the Home Office website has been hacked again. Do you not think people would actually say look, it’s reasonable that the security services should be able to monitor how terrorists are communicating across social
media and Liberal Democrats like yourselves shouldn’t tie the hands of the security services if they need the powers that they’re asking for?

**TIM FARRON:**
Yeah and that’s why if there are occasions when that is necessary, then through an appropriate judicial process then such powers could potentially be granted. We’re not saying that the security services shouldn’t have the right to protect us and keep us safe. What we’re saying is that we should not have the authorities, the state with the power to snoop on any given individual who potentially is a totally innocent person. That’s something that should be very alarming to anybody who values their right as a free citizen in this country.

**JAMES LANDALE:**
What do you say to people who say that your party’s just facing a wipeout at the local elections and you’re just using this to posture ahead of those elections?

**TIM FARRON:**
The Liberal Democrats are campaigners. We’re campaigners in opposition and we’re campaigners when we’re in government. I mean it’s interesting, in the last parliament you had awful authoritarian, Orwellian New Labour administration bringing through legislation like ID cards, like 28 day detention without trial - that sort of thing. The Liberal Democrats campaigned very volubly against those measures and weren’t able to do anything about it because we were in opposition.

**JAMES LANDALE:**

(over) So you’re agreeing …

**TIM FARRON:**
(over) Now we can get authoritarian legislation brought forward, the Liberal Democrats take it out and remove it. So it’s good to do it in a volume way. And as for the local elections, well you know I’ve been out knocking on doors in my patch here in Cumbria this last week and across the country in previous weeks, and I get the sense that … you know we’re aware this is going to be a difficult time for us. This is the first Liberal mid-term since you know for 65 years, so this is new territory and we
know it’s hard. But I also find that Lib Dems are up for the fight and we recognise that after last year’s you know poor results, we’re determined to fight back and to stand up for what we’ve achieved in government, for what we’re stopping the Tories doing, and what we’re doing in terms of clearing up the mess that Labour has left us with.

JAMES LANDALE:
You once famously said that divorce between the coalition parties is “inevitable”. How is that going to happen? When’s it going to happen? Take us through the process.

TIM FARRON:
Well all I meant was that this was a five year parliament with a five year coalition agreement. My politics haven’t changed one inch since the coalition was formed. That was just the arithmetic that the last election left us with and we have to get on and create a workable majority and govern the country. That term will end when the fixed term parliament ends in 2015. That doesn’t mean we can’t campaign as a distinctive and individual political party with our own very separate message - one which is progressive, it’s redistributive, it’s green, it’s fair, it’s liberal - and that will continue right up until the General Election. There’s bound to be some angst because you’ve got two parties kind of coalescing in government, trying to run a government, but at the same time fighting against each other in elections; but we’re grown-ups and it’s important that we behave like grown-ups. Scotland and Wales …

JAMES LANDALE:
(over) Thank you, Tim.

TIM FARRON:
… are very used to having coalition government in their assemblies, and why shouldn’t we get used to it across the whole of the UK?

JAMES LANDALE:
Tim Farron, thank you very much indeed for joining us.
INTERVIEW ENDS