INTERVIEW WITH:
DAVID MILIBAND

ANDREW MARR: Now, we know he’s earning lots of money and we know he has strong views about youth unemployment and the direction of the Labour Party but we haven’t seen a lot of David Miliband since that battleship for the Leader, fight for the Leadership and since his last big job as Foreign Secretary, he takes a lot of interest still in foreign affairs, notably, the deadliest dilemmas facing Britain and our allies in Afghanistan and Iraq and he is here with us. Welcome.

DAVID MILIBAND: Good morning Andrew.

ANDREW MARR: Good morning. Let’s start if we may with the big political story of the day, this sting operation conducted on the Tory Treasurer by The Sunday Times. Very embarrassing actually to have the exchange, the to and fro with alleged business people wanting to buy access in to Chequers, in to Downing Street.

DAVID MILIBAND: I think it’s a bit more than embarrassing. The idea that policy is for sale is grotesque. I think that David Cameron is going to have to, if not today, then in the next few days, publish the list of policies that have been sent from these dinners and have been sent to this Cameron Committee or even a Cabinet Committee, this No.10 Committee that has been advertised. In the end he’s going to have to do that, I would say he should do it now because this goes to the heart of the question of the relationship between a Party and a government – it blurs the lines, to put it diplomatically, in fact it crashes through the lines, that should exist between party and government.

ANDREW MARR: Business people, including under New Labour, have always sought access and always tried to lobby ministers. So what is different about this case do you think.

DAVID MILIBAND: The secrecy. The blurring. The, the crashing through of the line between government and Party and I think there’s something else because it goes to the heart of the question of whether or not the Tory Party has changed. The great claim that was made by David Cameron was that he had modernised the Conservative Party. My own view is that the reason they didn’t win the last General Election is that the public didn’t really believe that
the Tory Party had changed. Now the Budget provided some evidence, further
evidence that the change was skin deep. The revelations today go to the heart
of the claim that you can trust the Conservative Party because they’ve got rid
of those bad old ways. From what we know, they haven’t.

ANDREW MARR: Now your own Party went through Cash For Honours and
all, you know, some pretty big scandals back in the day. Is the time finally
arrived when the Parties have got to get together and talk seriously about
reforming the way British politics would... (overlaps) ...

DAVID MILIBAND: (interjection) Well I would certainly welcome that. There
has been no shortage of discussions and debates. I think that my own priority
would be to lower the limit of spending. The less cash that you allow to be
spent, the less need there is for this kind of thing. There’s obviously also the
question about public funding that already goes in to political parties - there
already is some public funding for political parties. My own view is you can’t,
in these times, argue for that to be increased. I don’t think you can bang up
the tax burden today in order to pay for more public funding. I would like to
see a reduction in the limit. I also think there is a real issue about individuals,
a single individual giving so much – but that’s something that needs to be
worked through by all the Parties.

ANDREW MARR: And yet your Party has to kind of finally reform its
relationship with the Unions doesn’t it.

DAVID MILIBAND: I think it, every party has to cope with a massive change
in politics, which is that the old Party structures don’t work any more, whether
in the Tories or in Labour. I think that we should, we at the Labour Party have
got to a far better job at engaging with individual trade unionists who pay a
small political levy and who we want to be more active in politics. It’s not a
matter of block votes, it’s a matter of real individuals and you ...

ANDREW MARR: So you have to get off the hook of the block votes and the
block funding.

DAVID MILIBAND: That’s not – look ...

ANDREW MARR: And get on to a mass party is what you’re saying.

DAVID MILIBAND: We’ve, we’ve got to be a mass – but I’ve really learnt a lot
about this in the last eighteen months. I’ve spent a lot of the time trying to
work on if you like, community politics. We’ve set up this Leadership
Academy. Some people may think it’s ironic that I should have set up a
Leadership Academy, but I set up a Leadership Academy for community
leadership, so that people can really make change in their own community
and I think that’s taught me about government that really engages people in a
different kind of way because the truth about Britain isn’t just that we have a
over-centralised State, an over-centralised constitution, we have under-
powered communities and I think that’s something we have to address
directly.
ANDREW MARR: And so to break up that, to get a different style of politics, we should get in to a position where you know, no rich person pays more than, I don’t know, a million pounds to a Party and no Union pays more than a million pounds to a Party. We get away from that centralised funding in to mass funding.

DAVID MILIBAND: Well the thing about the Labour Party is that you have individual trade unionists paying single digit pounds, three or four pounds, so it’s not about - there’s no, there’s no individual trade unionist who pays a million pounds. (interjection)

ANDREW MARR: The barons, the barons do tend to kind of you know, call the shots.

DAVID MILIBAND: Yeah. I know a bit about barons and – so – but – I know from my own constituency, the individual Trade Unionist who wants to make sure that their voice is heard in politics, I think we should celebrate that not somehow disavow it or run against it. I don’t think that’s the point. I think it’s about transparency, openness and also about strengthening our local democratic roots. I mean I spend my time working for the grass roots of the Labour Party. I’m as committed today to the Labour Party as I was when I joined but I’m looking to do something different, which is to make sure it becomes a sustainable organisation, at the grass roots.

ANDREW MARR: And yet, I just come back to this one more time – it has been the big Union barons who have been able to kind of ground stand as you say, you were on the sticky side of that yourself - that has to change doesn’t it. I mean that is what, you know, if you’re talking about the sort of deep suspicion about Conservative funding and so on one side, there is still that suspicion of the public on the side of your Party.

DAVID MILIBAND: Ed is the leader of the Party. Ed Balls is the Chancellor, Douglas Alexander is the Foreign Secretary, they are the people who speak for the Labour Party. And the good thing is that they are speaking loud and clear about what’s right. I mean given the pasting that the Unions gave to Ed and Ed earlier this year about their – what they’ve said, the very sensible things they said on the economy, no one should be in any doubt that the people who run the Labour Party are politicians and it’s very, very important that that is the case.

ANDREW MARR: You raise your own position there. When are you going to come back on to front line politics because you know, you’ve had some time out, you’ve earned a bit of money and you’ve looked at some of the grass-roots organisations. But you don’t seem to me to be somebody who’s ambition in politics is limited to being a back bench MP.

DAVID MILIBAND: My ambition is to contribute to the return of a Labour government and I think that I have to have the humility to recognise that while a daily soap opera might be fun for the media, it wouldn’t be good for
the Labour Party and I think, I don’t regret running for the Leadership but I honour the fact that my brother won and I am completely committed to doing everything I can to support him in that Leadership and I think I can best support him by working at the grass-roots. I mean the Shadow Cabinet has its place but it’s a bigger team than that.

ANDREW MARR: Does that mean that you’re actually going to leave politics because I mean you could ... (interjection)

DAVID MILIBAND: No.

ANDREW MARR: Well, if you’re, you know, if you’re not going to, if you don’t have aspirations to play at the top team, are you going to carry on as a Labour MP after the election.

DAVID MILIBAND: Yes, I’m, I’m representing my constituency in South Shields. We’re going to talk about youth unemployment. Today, five hundred and ninety young people have been unemployed for over six months in South Shields. That is something that – that’s what gets me up in the morning. That’s the fight I’m trying to ...

BOTH TOGETHER

ANDREW MARR: I’ll come directly on to that now but there’s an awful lot of people out there who want to know, you know, who admire you and want to know that you’re going to stay in British politics and want to know that you will stand as a Labour candidate ... (interjection)

DAVID MILIBAND: Yes.

ANDREW MARR: ... at South Shields, next election, definitely.

DAVID MILIBAND: Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely and I revealed that exclusively to the South Shields Gazette the day after I lost the leadership; so I’m happy to repeat the exclusive to you too.

ANDREW MARR: Okay. You have spent a lot of time on looking at the youth unemployment question. This is something that has plagued this country, way back in to the Labour years too. For a long time there was a kind of growing quiet crisis about youth unemployment and nobody on any side yet seems to have come up with an answer.

DAVID MILIBAND: Well, I think the truth is that the current government didn’t invent the problem of youth unemployment but they’ve made it worse. I mean the flagship programme they’ve got, the work programme, helps one in ten of the million unemployed, youth unemployed that you mentioned in your headlines. On that work programme, the success rate is about 20% so that means two in a hundred of the young unemployed are actually getting help from that flagship government programme. Now I Chaired this Commission that you referred to and there is a structural element to this, as well as a cyclical element if you like. It’s partly about the recession but it’s not only
about the recession. The structural element is about the education, the motivation, the opportunities and the apprenticeship system in this country doesn’t even advertise nationally or even regionally, the apprenticeships that are open and 75% of the increase in apprenticeships over the last two years has gone to the over 25s; so there’s been a lot of talk rightly about the cack-handedness of granny tax in the last few days but the dangerous complacency about the young unemployed, I think is really frightening because what the young people say to me is, what hope have I got? And that is a, that’s a challenge to all of us in the political elite about what are you doing for the next generation because we all know, if you’re unemployed for a few years as a youngster, the danger or the fact is, you’ll earn less and work less for the rest of your life.

ANDREW MARR: If you were a government minister watching this and thinking, okay, so what do we actually do? What is the next stage? Because they got in to a lot of trouble with the notion of compulsion, that people should be obliged to go to work for nothing to get them into the habit of work.

DAVID MILIBAND: Well, look if people are offered a job, they should take it. That’s right. But that’s not the issue. You’ve got, as I say, five hundred and ninety youngsters in South Shields looking for a job. Twenty six people chasing every vacancy. If I was a government minister today, happy thought but if my Party was in government, I would be saying, even if you accepted the fiscal straight jacket, that the government have created, even within that, even with hardly any demand in the economy, we could do so much more. We know that a part time job guarantee, which would pay the minimum wage and get young people in to work, and allow them to do job search on the side, that would make a difference because all the evidence shows it has a success rate of at least 50%. Secondly, I think we’ve got to get the apprenticeship system working for young people. As I said, 75% of the increase in apprenticeships going to over, the older ones. The government have done something good, which is that they’re starting in April a subsidy scheme so that fifty thousand youngsters will get a wage subsidy but the government’s own figures show that they expect unemployment to be going down by 2014. I say bring forward the spend from 2014, spend it now before the problem becomes a structural crisis.

ANDREW MARR: What about pushing people more. I mean this notion of withdrawing benefit. Is that wrong in itself.

DAVID MILIBAND: No, of course it’s not. If you’re, if you’re – it’s a contract and young people aren’t afraid of a contract. What they say is, don’t give me responsibility if there’s no opportunity.

ANDREW MARR: Yeah.

DAVID MILIBAND: They’re very clear. Give me a high quality opportunity and then say, if I don’t take it, if I just stay at home, then okay, you can take whatever benefits. But remember this as well, the vast majority of eighteen to twenty four year olds, don’t get benefits. Sixteen and seventeen year olds get benefits but eighteen to twenty fours, they don’t get benefits. So this idea that
you’ve got this welfare state paying for the young unemployed to live lives of luxury is absolute nonsense.

ANDREW MARR: We could talk about this for a lot longer, but I’d like to talk a bit about ... (interjection)

DAVID MILIBAND: Sorry, I get very ...

ANDREW MARR: No. No.

DAVID MILIBAND: ... agitated, you know, passionate about it.

ANDREW MARR: It’s very interesting and going back to what I said before, I mean you do not seem to me to be somebody who wants to kind of step away from British politics, that’s all I’m saying.

DAVID MILIBAND: I’m (fluffs) The things that brought me in to the Labour Party, which were absolute passion about the potential of this country and it’s ability to make a difference for its own citizens and around the world, remain. But I also have to have the humility to recognise, I have to do that in a different way and I’m learning and changing as a person because that world out there is being transformed by the minute and that is something we have to ... (interjection)

ANDREW MARR: Let’s talk about the world out there. I mean two huge crises that you experienced in government, which have not gone away in any way. One is Afghanistan and one is Iran. Afghanistan, after the terrible, terrible events of the last few weeks, it’s now looking as if we are going to have to withdraw. We were going to withdraw, sort of rather chaotically – the different Western governments don’t seem to have got the same timescale and the Taliban are going to come back and everything that you hoped when you were in government, isn’t – is, is ... (interjection)

DAVID MILIBAND: You’re right to be worried. Worried both that this will become the forgotten war, only in the headlines when there is terrible tragedy. And that the danger of a continued civil war that does damage to our security interests but also the legacy of work there. I fear that unless we change course, things will get worse not better. Changing course means putting centre stage the political talks that are the only way to end this conflict.

ANDREW MARR: That has to be an independent figure. That can’t be America or Britain.

DAVID MILIBAND: No, it’s got to be a UN, Security Council sanction mediator who talks to all sides. No conditions on who enters the talks. Now - people watching will say well didn’t I hear ten days ago that the Taliban have said won’t talk to the Americans. I mean they would say that wouldn’t they. But the point of an independent mediator, drawn from the Muslim world is that he would go round talking to all sides. He’d talk to the Afghan government, he’d talk to us, the West, he’d talk to all the different parts of the
insurgency because there is only one way to end the war in Afghanistan with any honour and that is all the tribes in the political settlement, al Qaeda out and the neighbours, Pakistan, all the way round to Iran on side and committed to ... (overlaps) stability.

ANDREW MARR: Is getting that process working more important than getting our troops out by this date or that date.

DAVID MILIBAND: Well they go together. I always say, the problem is the debate about the end date for combat is getting in the way of the debate about the end strategy.

ANDREW MARR: It seems a very strange way to fight a war to say and by the way, at a certain time on a certain date we're off again isn’t it.

DAVID MILIBAND: Well the Taliban know that too but we are, there are unbelievable bravery and intelligence being shown by our troops and there are tactical gains. The point is, what's the strategy and the strategy has to be a political strategy.

ANDREW MARR: And on Iran, which again is something that you're very familiar with. We now seem to be in a new phase of greater danger where the Israeli government is saying, listen, there's been enough talking, there's been enough diplomacy, very soon they will have the bomb and we're going to act if nobody else does, probably this summer.

DAVID MILIBAND: Well I see it rather differently than that. It’s interesting that you should put it that way. I wrote in December that I was worried we were sleep walking to war. I was worried in January, February that the drum beat of war had started, but I think that what happened in Washington last week, last month in the meeting between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu was very significant. President Obama took charge of the Iran dossier and said I’m going to handle this. I’m going to be absolutely clear that if Iran gets a bomb, I will take them out and they’re not going to be allowed to do that. But until that moment comes I’m going to make sure a political, a diplomatic process sorts this, not a military one. It was a very clear warning I think about his own position. And I think the game has changed in the following way. The Israelis have been told don’t bomb. Rightly, in my view, that would be a big mistake but the game has changed to the following extent, we’ve got to discuss now, what are the conditions in which Iran might actually agree to a cessation of its military programme and I think there are conditions. We can’t, if it’s a ... (interjection)

ANDREW MARR: We have to give them something.

DAVID MILIBAND: Well, I would put it slightly differently. What’s on the table for them is a civilian nuclear power programme that can help their economy. What isn’t on the table is leakage in to a military programme. They will never accept that deal if they feel it’s humiliation. They will never accept that deal if they feel they’re just giving in to the Americans. I also think – in
government I used to say, look, stick to the nuclear programme, don’t worry about this other regional stuff. I think now actually, you’ve got have the regional role of Iran and the nuclear question on the table at the same time.

ANDREW MARR: But the military option, that big stick, has to be there as well in the background.

DAVID MILIBAND: Yeah, yeah I agree with that. But President Obama has been absolutely clear, the red line is weaponisation. That’s the right place to put it and I think the world should be clear that that’s what America wants and that’s what America will deliver.

ANDREW MARR: David Miliband, it’s been very interesting. Thank you very much indeed.

END OF INTERVIEW WITH DAVID MILIBAND