JAMES LANDALE:
The Prime Minister once said he wanted to lead the “greenest government ever.” Well we don’t hear quite so much about that now, with ministers much more preoccupied with the economy. The quest for growth is likely to mean building more houses, more roads, bigger airports. At the same time there seems to be a bit of a backlash against wind turbines, and the Chancellor wants to encourage fracking for shale gas. So are we turning away from environmentalism? Well I’m joined now by the Leader of the Green Party, Natalie Bennett. Welcome, Natalie.

NATALIE BENNETT:
Thank you very much.

JAMES LANDALE:
Are we turning away from environmentalism?

NATALIE BENNETT:
Well I think we’ve certainly got grave concerns that the government, who originally
started out with at least a greenwash of environmental issues, have certainly turned away from that and they’re simply failing to deliver on things that just make perfect sense for a jobs rich, low carbon economy - things like insulating our homes, making them warm and comfortable and cutting our fuel bills. And the whole pattern of austerity, you know it’s very clear that that as an economic model has absolutely failed. I mean the Green Party, we believe we absolutely must be investing in the future of Britain, but we’ve got to invest in the right things.

JAMES LANDALE:
But some people think the government’s going too far. It’s subsidising, as you say, insulation in people’s homes, it’s subsidising a lot of renewable energy at the moment - particularly on wind farms. There are many people who think that the government’s doing too much.

NATALIE BENNETT:
Well the thing is we actually need certainty of energy supply in the future and that means renewables. It means we have to spend money on something. And you know at the moment the government is conducting secret negotiations that, although they’ve said they weren’t going to subsidise nuclear, we’re looking potentially at a situation where they could be offering EDF a subsidy of a billion pounds a year with a 30 year contract - £30 billion to subsidise nuclear. Now that’s absolutely the wrong direction, but we do need to spend money on cutting the demand. So then we need to spend less money on generating things with wind turbines, with solar, but all of those things we need to do to secure our energy supply.

JAMES LANDALE:
But isn’t the problem that you’re sort of almost going against the tide on this, if I can confuse my renewable metaphors there, because …

NATALIE BENNETT:
Well tide could be useful in the future certainly.
Tide could be useful. There is this new development of shale gas and this fracking procedure that we’re reading so much about at the moment. The Chancellor appears very keen on this. It’s clearly transforming energy markets around the world. Isn’t this undermining the case for renewables at the moment?

NATALIE BENNETT:
Absolutely not. The fact is that fracking is no answer for Britain at all. First of all, the shale gases, the shale we have in Europe are much deeper and much shallower than they are in America. It's an entirely different geological category. And if you go to the Committee on Climate Change, independent body, they’re saying that at the best possible estimate shale gas could supply 10 per cent of Britain’s needs. If we go and lock ourselves into gas, what we’re locking ourselves into is extremely expensive imported gas far into the future. And of course we all know that energy bills have gone up enormously and the fact is …

JAMES LANDALE:
(over) But here’s all this wonderful cheap energy that we can dig out of the ground.

NATALIE BENNETT:
But it’s not cheap. It costs a lot to extract. You know there’s no prediction that this will cut prices here at all. And much more than that - what we’re talking about fracking…the areas where they’re talking about fracking, local people have looked into it and are getting very concerned because what you’re talking about is utterly industrialising the countryside - huge numbers of large lorry movements, five million gallons of water per well, which you’ve got to find from somewhere and then get rid of again all of that waste water. You know in America they’ve got large areas of land with very few people in them. They can write off that land. Here we’ve got lots of people everywhere. They don’t want to live in the middle of industrialised countryside.

JAMES LANDALE:
What is a greater priority - economic growth or protecting the environment?

NATALIE BENNETT:
That’s entirely a false dichotomy because what we need to do is invest in things like home insulation, in renewable energy. What we need to do is bring manufacturing and food production back to Britain. You’ve been talking a lot this morning about the horse meat scandal and what a giant you know globalised food system is doing, and we’ve been looking at a situation we’re importing most of our fruit into Britain. We need to start growing our own fruit again. We need to you know have our own meat. So what we need to do is invest in restoring the British strong local economies - manufacturing, food production and ensure warm, comfortable houses. All of those things we need to invest in. We need to build a jobs rich low carbon economy.

JAMES LANDALE:
Is it really true that you know how to shear a sheep?

NATALIE BENNETT:
It is very true, although it’s a few years since I’ve done it. I’m not quite sure the knees would take it anymore.

JAMES LANDALE:
Well it is the era of cuts, so you certainly have a bit of experience with that.

NATALIE BENNETT:
Indeed.

JAMES LANDALE:
Natalie Bennett, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

INTERVIEW ENDS