SUSANNA REID:
Later this morning Nick Clegg will address the Lib Dem faithful as they conclude their spring conference in Brighton. Despite the party’s victory in Eastleigh, the conference has not been entirely plain sailing for him with concerns over the behaviour of some senior figures and also over economic policy. So where does the party position itself in the run-up to the General Election in 2015? Well in charge of that strategy for the Lib Dems is the former Leader, Paddy Ashdown, and he joins me now from Brighton. Lord Ashdown, good morning to you.

LORD ASHDOWN:
Good morning, Susanna. Nice to be with you.

SUSANNA REID:
It’s good to have you with us. Your party’s President, Tim Farron, has described the Lib Dems as like “cockroaches surviving a nuclear war, going through a bruising and a battering but coming out”. Is that the right description?
LORD ASHDOWN:
Listen everybody chooses their own words. Those are Tim’s. They were made before the Eastleigh by-election. He’s a jolly and straight speaking guy. He uses language that he chooses, not the language I’d have chosen (chosen/used) by the way. I think the party is now … I think the significance of this week - if I can put it to you, Susanna - is that it’s another week that pushes forward the transformation of the party from a party of protest to a party of government that I think has been the remarkable achievement of our extraordinary and very talented leader, Nick Clegg. And I think you see a party over which he now comfortably presides. That isn’t to say there aren’t difficulties - of course there are, it’s the Liberal Democrats, we will disagree with the leader from time to time and I guess we might do that this morning over secret courts. But there is no doubt about the direction he’s set for the party, there’s no doubt about the strength with which the party has risen to the challenge of being in government; and thanks to Eastleigh, and other elections, by the way, there is no doubt that where Liberal Democrats seek to work and match a national message with a local one, we continue to win.

SUSANNA REID:
Okay. Concern though raised about economic policy. You paint yourselves as the party of the fair society. We hear from the Archbishop of Canterbury this morning criticising that cap on welfare rises, saying they hit families and the most vulnerable. Is he right?

LORD ASHDOWN:
Look you know that’s an important thing for the Archbishop and churchmen to say, and of course all of us are concerned with that. That’s why indeed the Liberal Democrats have such a commitment to making sure that our contribution to tackling the terrible deficit this country was left - in large part, not exclusively but in large part by the failures of the Labour government previously - is tackled with fairness in mind and it’s important that we are reminded about the effect of that.

SUSANNA REID:
Yeah and you’re …
LORD ASHDOWN:  
(over) But I think as your previous …

SUSANNA REID:  
(over) Sorry, Lord Ashdown, but your party leader, I mean Nick Clegg …

LORD ASHDOWN:  
(over) Well allow me to, allow me …

SUSANNA REID:  
(over) … has said he doesn’t want to solve the deficit on the backs of the poor. The Archbishop of Canterbury is raising exactly that concern.

LORD ASHDOWN:  
Yes but I think, as your very interesting commentator Jason Forsyth (who I have a lot of time for by the way and who heads up Save the Children) said, where they’re trying to get to, the universal credit, is a really important point and a huge achievement if they do so; and, by the way, something that has been done by no other party. Now it is pretty well inevitable that in that process of transition, there will be spikes, there will be points as you move from one old system - an unsustainable system, by the way - to a new one which is supported by people like Save the Children - there’ll be moments when it’s more difficult than at others. Look no-one is going to doubt …

SUSANNA REID:  
(over) Well is this one of those moments? Does this give you … Does a letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury …

LORD ASHDOWN:  
(over) Hello.

SUSANNA REID:  
(over) … does it give you pause for thought?

LORD ASHDOWN:
I’ve lost that. Are you still there Susanna?

**SUSANNA REID:**
I certainly am and we’re listening intently.

**LORD ASHDOWN:**
Are you still there, Susanna?

**SUSANNA REID:**
Ah …

**LORD ASHDOWN:**
No, you’re not.

**SUSANNA REID:**
We seem to have a problem with the line to Lord Ashdown.

**LORD ASHDOWN:**
Can you hear?

**SUSANNA REID:**
Let’s see if we can just quickly re-establish that line. Lord Ashdown, can you hear me? I’m still asking you about the letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury and the way that he appears to be …

**LORD ASHDOWN:**
It’s gone completely.

**SUSANNA REID:**
No, we’ve gone completely. Lord Ashdown, thank you anyway for your time and I do apologise for the technical gremlins that sometimes occur when we have to speak to people who are at their party conferences down in Brighton. Tim Montgomerie is back. Justin Forsyth in fact from Save the Children. Well Lord Ashdown was just talking exactly about the points you know raised by the Archbishop of Canterbury and
this letter. I mean does this pose a problem for the Liberal Democrats because this is a government which is having to make these cuts, it says, because of the deficit, and yet someone as big as the Archbishop of Canterbury you know intervening and saying they’re not fair?

**JUSTIN FORSYTH:**
I think Lord Ashdown was about to say - and I mean not that I can predict it - but the universal credit and the welfare reform is an end, I mean this bringing together of all the benefits within one package, but also the focus of government on making work pay is the right one.

**SUSANNA REID:**
Okay.

**JUSTIN FORSYTH:**
So the question is how do you do that?

**SUSANNA REID:**
Well … I interrupted you because I was optimistic that we would actually be able to hear Lord Ashdown put that into words himself. Unfortunately I think we are still working on the line. Let’s … let’s give it a try. Lord Ashdown, we welcome you back to the Andrew Marr programme. Can you hear us again?

**LORD ASHDOWN:**
Yes, sorry about that glitch, Susanna. Look, as I think Jason was saying, as you go through this process there are going to be points of transition where things are more difficult than others. I don’t think we can get ourselves out of the economic mess that we’re in without people having a price to pay. We are certain that it is the rich who have caused in large measure some of these problems, that this burden has to be properly distributed. It’s absolutely right …

**SUSANNA REID:**
*(over)* Okay, but are the right people …
LORD ASHDOWN:
(over) … that we keep a focus on this issue of fairness.

SUSANNA REID:
Are the right people …

LORD ASHDOWN:
(over) Go on.

SUSANNA REID:
… paying the price? We have just heard from the Shadow Home Secretary of course saying there shouldn’t be a tax cut - as they call it in the Labour Party - for the highest earners, which is coming in.

LORD ASHDOWN:
Well hang on, hang on, hang on, Susanna. We have as Liberal Democrats in the coalition government taken, what is it, I can’t remember, two million I think out of tax altogether. Thanks to what we have done, you now have a situation where those earning less than £10,000 are removed from taxation. I mean I don’t think there has ever been a shift that has taken the poorer out of taxation, that has been more beneficial to them than the one that has taken place under this government.

SUSANNA REID:
Okay. Can I ask you …

LORD ASHDOWN:
And by the way, far, far more than was ever done under Labour.

SUSANNA REID:
Okay. Well can I ask you something else then? The mansion tax. Labour introducing a vote in the House of Commons on the mansion tax. Mansion tax something that Liberal Democrats want to introduce, so does that mean that Lib Dem MPs will vote for that Labour motion?
LORD ASHDOWN:
Look, I can’t predict to you what will happen in the House of Commons. That’ll be a judgement made by my House of Commons colleagues nearer the time. And you know we welcome converts to the cause however late and however opportunistic they are.

SUSANNA REID:
Okay. You call it opportunistic. It is a vote on a tax that you want to introduce, so would you advise your Lib Dem colleagues to vote for that?

LORD ASHDOWN:
Susanna, I … Susanna, I would want to see the motion. I would want to see what the circumstances were. That’s an issue which will be taken by my House of Commons colleagues, not by me.

SUSANNA REID:
It would be weird though, wouldn’t it, for a party which was behind a mansion tax to vote against it?

LORD ASHDOWN:
It would be weird for the party to vote for a motion they didn’t agree with. Let’s see what’s going to happen. I mean I know you want me to predict what my colleagues in the Commons will do. Honestly I’m not going to do so because I can’t. I haven’t seen the motion, I don’t know the terms of it. They will make their judgement and I’m sure they’ll make the right one. Now there are other issues. Shall we get onto those unless you want to continue on this?

SUSANNA REID:
Well it is just a big issue for the Liberal Democrats …

LORD ASHDOWN:
Yeah, sure.

SUSANNA REID:
… which is why I’m focusing on it. It is also an opportunity for the Liberal Democrats to show themselves as distinct from the Conservatives. You are in charge of electoral strategy for 2015. That is a decoupling that at some stage has to happen, doesn’t it?

LORD ASHDOWN:
What decoupling has to happen?

SUSANNA REID:
Well because you are going to want to …

LORD ASHDOWN:
Sorry, I don’t understand the question. Forgive me.

SUSANNA REID:
You are going to want to fight the next General Election on your own terms as a separate party, not as …

LORD ASHDOWN:
Correct.

SUSANNA REID:
… you know part of a coalition.

LORD ASHDOWN:
Yeah, I’m sure all three parties will want to fight the next election as separate parties. Of course they will. How else could you fight it?

SUSANNA REID:
Well …

LORD ASHDOWN:
But the coalition has to last all the way through to polling day. Look, we will be judged, Susanna, to the extent that we have participated effectively, courageously and
with intelligence - and in particular seeking to introduce fairness into the government’s decision - as to how well we govern Britain in the face of the worst economic crisis we’ve had for fifty years. Governments last till polling day. When they fall, when their time comes to end that process, parties fight independently, of course they do. What else would you expect?

SUSANNA REID:
I want to ask you a question about something that’s happening tomorrow. Chris Huhne, a man who once might have been leader of your party, he is going to be sentenced. It is possible that he will be jailed. Is this a personal tragedy or does it raise serious issues for the party? Your own leader described Chris Huhne as an “outstanding MP”.

LORD ASHDOWN:
It’s a personal tragedy.

SUSANNA REID:
Okay. Lord Ashdown, thanks very much indeed for joining us.

LORD ASHDOWN:
Thanks very much.

INTERVIEW ENDS