ANDREW MARR:
Life inside the coalition, which has been a tad tetchy of late with some dropped balls, leaks and bleats. It was the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords who forced the government to change tack on health reform, and now two other key pieces of proposed legislation are under attack - new restrictions that we’ve just been talking about for big charity donations and new powers for the security services to monitor emails and text messages. Paddy Ashdown, Lord Ashdown, joins me from Yeovil. Welcome, Paddy Ashdown. Can I just ask, first of all, about your current expectations and feelings on this new surveillance package of measures because you did say in an article this week that you thought this was turning us into a nation of “suspects”. How seriously do you take these measures?

LORD ASHDOWN:
Well good morning, Andrew. I mean the people who turned us into a nation of suspects of course were Labour who introduced a vast pond into which the security services and the state could fish without any controls whatsoever. I mean let me just remind you, that thanks to Labour’s proposals, the government now has a right to know and can demand access to your telephone records, about who you spoke to for
the last year whenever they wish to do so without constraint. Look, there is a problem and then there are some principles we have to observe. The problem is that it has always been accepted - and I accept it and most normal people do - that the state has a right to monitor the communications of its citizens where there is a real case that there is a serious crime being committed or some threat to the security of the state. The principle is that that is always done on an individual basis, politically or judicially controlled, and where there is good evidence to support that case. So we now have a situation where proposals put in by Labour - which we oppose by the way - are about to be expanded. So now how do we deal with that? Well there is a need to expand it because the criminals and terrorists now have access to new kinds of mechanisms of communication - Skype, Facebook - which cannot be adequately monitored. There is a solution to this problem, which is okay bring the communications interception legislation up to date, so that we are able to monitor those who are threatening the security of the state or committing serious crimes, but make it subject to individual monitoring, applied for by the security services on the basis of evidence and politically controlled. And that’s the way you resolve both the problem - by sticking to the principles.

ANDREW MARR:
So if that doesn’t happen, if these proposals for as it were general fishing expeditions in these new areas go forward, will you try to stop it in the House of Lords?

LORD ASHDOWN:
Look, here’s the basic point; that you cannot create a nation of suspects, you cannot create a fishing pool into which the security services and the state has a right to intervene wherever it feels like and subject to no controls whatsoever. If it comes forward in that form - and my guess is it won’t - then of course that is not something that Liberal Democrats would find acceptable.

ANDREW MARR:
Right.
We didn’t … We oppose Labour’s propositions. We’re not likely to go ahead with an expansion on propositions that we didn’t like in the first place.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Sure.

**LORD ASHDOWN:**
But if this is going to come forward to say we will deal with the new means of communications but we’ll make it subject to the basic principles - 1) that it has to be individually based; 2) that it has to be politically or judicially controlled; and 3) that it has to be evidence based, then that’s a sensible way forward and I suspect that’s how it’ll come forward.

**ANDREW MARR:**
So you’d expect these changes before the Queen’s speech. And can you also just reflect on the fact that we read that it was Nick Clegg who was sitting in charge of the committee that agreed all of this, your own leader?

**LORD ASHDOWN:**
*(laughs)* Yeah, I heard David Davis say that, and (not for the first time) he is completely wrong. What happened was that the committee on which Nick Clegg sits was brought the problem and Nick Clegg said go ahead, let’s come up with proposals to do deal with that problem but none of those proposals have yet come forward. They’ve been commented on, but there has been no sight of the detailed proposal. So it’s perfectly right that he should say there is a problem, let’s find a way to deal with it …

**ANDREW MARR:**
Yes.

**LORD ASHDOWN:**
… but it’s also right to say that when the proposals come forward, they should stick to the principles that Liberal Democrats believe in.
ANDREW MARR:
There appears to be another major retreat going on at the moment over the tax treatment of rich individuals giving money to charities. Is that something that you would welcome; I mean that this is a mistake that needs to be unwound?

LORD ASHDOWN:
Well let’s say there is a certain period of stumble-footedness on the part of the government, chiefly on the Conservative side, and there is a problem here. But again it’s simply not open to the kind of simplistic solution that Labour grabs hold of for opportunistic reasons, and I was a bit surprised to hear David Davis refer to as well. Look, I’m the President of UNICEF UK. I know exactly how these are hitting serious big and small charities. I know the consequences, I’ve seen it myself. But let’s just recognise there is a problem. What’s the government trying to do? It’s trying to make sure that the rich pay their taxes and don’t dodge them. I mean just imagine, Andrew, for a moment that everybody did this, what the rich are able to do; that everybody said, “I’m not going to pay my taxes. I’m going to contribute to a charity of my choice.” No taxes, no hospitals, no schools, no welfare. So there is a sensible balance to be struck here. If the government has to recalibrate - do a retreat, if you like - in order to find that sensible balance, then that’s right and proper that they should do so. And they’ve already said that they’re going to go into a period of consultation. UNICEF and others will take part in that and I’m sure a sensible balance can be found. But let’s not for god’s sake pretend that there isn’t a problem. If some of the rich are dodging their income tax by putting the money into charities, the people who pay for that are the poor, the schools, the hospitals, our armed services, our welfare system. We want people to pay taxes; we don’t want to kill off charities. But the idea that you can simply allow people to sideline money that they should be putting into our taxes to the charity of their choice is nonsense.

ANDREW MARR:
Yuh.

LORD ASHDOWN:
There’s a balance to be struck. I’m sure a sensible one can be.
ANDREW MARR:
In the first phase of this coalition government, a lot of people thought that the Liberal Democrats’ personality, identity if you like, was being submerged by the larger party. That appears to be very much not happening at the moment. I mean the Liberal Democrats are asserting themselves more. We haven’t seen much of an effect in the opinion polls, but do you feel that you’re into a different phase in this coalition government where the party is clearer in its profile?

LORD ASHDOWN:
I think the Liberal Democrats will prosper or not at the next election to the extent that we are able to show that we can take the hard knocks of governing Britain at a very difficult time …

ANDREW MARR:
Right.

LORD ASHDOWN:
… as a result of the appalling economic crisis left by the last government, and I think in the end, that’s what’ll matter. And I do believe that whilst doing that, we have to show our identity.

ANDREW MARR:
Okay.

LORD ASHDOWN:
I think we’re doing both of those things at present.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright. Just …

LORD ASHDOWN:
Are we getting the electoral benefit of it? Not yet …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Not yet.

**LORD ASHDOWN:**
… but it’ll come.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Okay. Just on the big overseas issue with all your experience in the Balkans and so on. Is there any chink of light, do you think, in the Syrian impasse at the moment?

**LORD ASHDOWN:**
No, I don’t think there is. And I think the card we’re not playing Andrew here … I know that Cathy Ashton held the famous Euro3+3 - that is Britain, France, Germany plus Russia, China and America - to deal with this issue over the last couple, three days, but we’re missing a really important player. If there is one country that can play a real role, an increasing role by the way in the Western Balkans, in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is one of the great crisis centres of the world at present, it’s Turkey. And by the way, playing a very constructive role. Which country is going to let’s say put down an area of Syria which refugees will be protected in? The Turks are able to do so and are willing to do so. And so I think what we need to be doing is forget thinking about this simply in Western terms and to start playing in the new players of which Turkey is one …

**ANDREW MARR:**
Alright.

**LORD ASHDOWN:**
… and it’s the absence of Turkey playing that role which I think is inhibiting us having the effect we should.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Indeed. Paddy Ashdown, Lord Ashdown, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**