ANDREW MARR: It’s been a roller coaster week, as we’ve been hearing, for the Labour Party. Jeremy Corbyn said he’d do things differently and he’s certainly proved that when it comes to clothes, media appearances, royal protocol, managing the party, he has a unique style. But is this too disorganised, even chaotic? I’m joined now by one of the most senior members of his team: the Shadow Foreign Secretary, Hilary Benn. Good morning to you, Hilary Benn.

HILARY BENN: Andrew, good morning.

ANDREW MARR: Now one of the really difficult questions for those of us looking from the outside is who is really in charge. Is it the shadow cabinet? Because the shadow cabinet is not overall as it were Corbynite – there’s the leader of the party, there’s the shadow chancellor but not many others who are as it were Jeremy Corbyn’s natural soulmates, lots of other people inside the shadow cabinet – and you have a discussion on, for instance, the welfare cap and then Jeremy Corbyn goes and says something different at the TUC. So who is in charge?
HILARY BENN:
Well Jeremy’s just been elected with a very large mandate. He’s …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So he’s in charge?

HILARY BENN:
… he’s the leader of the party. He’s appointed a big team. It’s an inclusive team and we’ve got a big task on our hands, which is to persuade the British people to support Labour when it comes to the next election. You were just talking about the railways a moment ago with Justine. As you said, it’s a very popular policy because we need an integrated transport system. And you know you get on the train and people say well if you’ve got a ticket for a different train service, you can’t use it here. Imagine Londoners getting on the London Underground Piccadilly line and the announcement says if you’ve got a ticket for the Victoria or the District line it’s not valid here. The fact is I travel regularly on East Coast. For 5 years it was directly run and it returned money to the Treasury and the ideology was the government saying no that company cannot continue. Foreign owned state owned railway companies can bid …

ANDREW MARR:
Yes.

HILARY BENN:
… but we can’t continue to have a publicly run one. It’s commonsense and it’ll be good for passengers.

ANDREW MARR:
I’m still interested beyond that in exactly how policy is going to be made in the Labour Party going forward because both Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell have been pretty frank and clear about wanting to bring in that great movement – those £3 voters – the 250,000 people who voted for Jeremy – coming in and actually making policy as part of the party conference. More power to the local parties, more power to the activists; less power to the MPs, less power to the shadow cabinet. John McDonnell said yesterday that MPs are going to be shocked by what’s going to
HILARY BENN:
Well we’re the Labour Party, we’re a broad church, and in our life blood is debate and discussion, and in the end party conference, the National Policy Forum will decide how policy is going to evolve. Currently we all stood on a manifesto at the last General Election and that remains the policy of the party. But look we should welcome a debate because one of the reasons that Jeremy won is that a lot of people said, ‘can we open up politics?’ All parties are coalitions of view, as you will know very well Andrew …

ANDREW MARR:
They certainly are, yeah.

HILARY BENN:
… and what is refreshing about Jeremy is he says, ‘Well, I welcome that, I acknowledge that’. Instead of everybody pretending when a new leader is elected well we’ve all changed our minds about what we think, you have a debate and a discussion and that is a good thing.

ANDREW MARR:
One of … Absolutely. But one of the things that’s clear about this is that the party’s manifesto of the last election is very different to the mandate that Jeremy Corbyn won in his leadership election. So if you look at something like Trident: very, very large numbers of the people who supported Jeremy Corbyn, like lots of people who voted ‘Yes’ in the Scottish Referendum, are determined that Trident must go. What’s your view?

HILARY BENN:
My view is that we need to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent. I share with Jeremy the wish to see a world that is free of nuclear weapons, but I don’t believe for one second if Britain were to give up its deterrent any other of the nuclear states would give theirs up. And secondly, Andrew, the truth is we live in a differently dangerous world now and we need a continuous at-sea deterrent. We need to do it in
the most cost-effective way. And that is the view which the Labour Party, including
the Labour Party conference, has taken for many years now.

ANDREW MARR:
So this is why I was banging on about who is in charge, who takes the view, because
there is as it were the Jeremy Corbyn view and the Corbyn Movement view and there
is the Hilary Benn view. And my question: a lot of people are going to want to know
what’s going to happen, who is going to win in that tussle because it’s massively
important. It must be a red line for you, I assume?

HILARY BENN:
Well of course it’s important because it’s about the security of the nation.

ANDREW MARR:
Exactly.

HILARY BENN:
Now the Labour Party conference in the end will take a decision, but consistently for
many years the view has been we should maintain that independent nuclear deterrent
but there’ll be a debate and Jeremy’s encouraging that.

ANDREW MARR:
If the Labour Party votes to get rid of Trident and to leave NATO, could you serve in
the shadow cabinet?

HILARY BENN:
I don’t think that that is going to happen. And can I just say …

ANDREW MARR:
Sixty per cent of your party voted for Jeremy Corbyn on that manifesto.

HILARY BENN:
But we’ve been members of NATO, as you will know, since it was created – in part
with the support of the Labour government at the end of the Second World War that
created the NHS - and Ernie Bevin was the foreign secretary that helped make it happen and it has been a cornerstone of our security and I simply don’t see that happening.

ANDREW MARR:  
But this great movement that Jeremy galvanised up and down the country, which brought him into the Labour leadership, takes a radically different point of view and they will be mortified and quite angry to hear you saying that. In the end there is going to have to be one heck of an argument inside the Labour Party over policies like Trident, re-nationalisation, taxes, NATO and all the rest of it.

HILARY BENN:  
Well I don’t think anybody should be mortified or angry about an honest and open debate about what the right thing to do is. And when it comes to national security, the first responsibility of government and indeed of the opposition – and we are working together to be a strong and effective opposition to the government – is to defend the nation, but to hold the government to account and we’ve done that this week in opposing the trade union bill and the tax credit changes. You know when over 8 million people discover next April that this government is cutting their income – they go to work and they’re being penalised – they’re going to be very angry about that.

ANDREW MARR:  
Meanwhile Russian tanks are rolling through Eastern Ukraine. Vladimir Putin’s putting jets into Syria to help Assad as well. Do you think this is the result of NATO provocation?

HILARY BENN:  
No I don’t, I don’t think that is the case. But I’m of course extremely concerned about the situation …

ANDREW MARR:  
(over) Because Jeremy Corbyn does think that.

HILARY BENN:
Well I’m extremely concerned about the situation in Syria because our first priority must be as an international community to strain every sinew to try and bring an end to the appalling conflict there - the barrel bombs that President Assad is dropping on his own people and the sheer brutality of Isil Daesh that is killing people because they’re supposedly of the wrong religion, throwing gay people off buildings, selling women in markets - and the question we will have to consider is what is the most effective thing to do to deal with that.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) In the House of Commons quite soon and air strikes are likely to be proposed by the government. What’s your position going to be on that?

HILARY BENN:
We’ve said consistently if the government has a proposition, we need to look at what it is: What is the target, the objective? What is the legal base? What is the view of nations in the region, including the government of Iraq? But I think what we’ve learnt …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) And if they can answer those questions to your satisfaction, would you vote for air strikes?

HILARY BENN:
I was just going to go on to say that if the refugee crisis that we have been witnessing on our television screens this summer teaches us anything, is that you need to have a broad approach to deal with this. And I would add to the list of things that the government must consider and bring before the House of Commons is getting more humanitarian aid in. Britain is doing a great job, but part of the reason that people are leaving Turkey and Lebanon and Jordan is because the rations are being cut. Their children aren’t in school and they see no hope, no future. Can we do anything about safe zones within Syria and, crucially, a major international political effort bringing in the Saudis, the Iranians, the Russians, the Americans and Europe to try and find a political settlement because that is the only way we’re going to deal with the refugee crisis, Andrew.
ANDREW MARR:
Are you relieved that Jeremy Corbyn has given up his leadership of the Stop the War Coalition?

HILARY BENN:
Well Jeremy’s taken that decision because he’s got other big responsibilities.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Yes, sure. I’m just asking for your response to it.

HILARY BENN:
Well that is a decision for Jeremy to make and he’s decided that.

ANDREW MARR:
The Stop the War Coalition started really because of the Iraq War and you once said that, having voted for the Iraq War, you could look people in the eye and say that was the right decision and you stand by it. Do you still say that?

HILARY BENN:
It was the right decision to take at the time given what we knew then. Clearly had we known …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Looking back. There’s huge numbers of people killed since.

HILARY BENN:
No but looking back, if we had known then that there were no weapons of mass destruction but it was believed at the time there were - why do you think the weapons inspectors were there? Indeed we know that Saddam’s … some of his generals believed they were there and he certainly wanted to create that impression with his neighbours - clearly parliament wouldn’t have voted to take that decision.

ANDREW MARR:
And yet you have to be judged by the effects of decisions that you take. Jeremy Corbyn is apparently going to apologise on behalf of the Labour Party for that war. Would you like to apologise for that war?

HILARY BENN:
We got it wrong because there were no weapons of mass destruction and that is clearly the case. But what Iraq has now is a fragile democracy. Clearly …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Iraq has a civil war, massacre, so-called Islamic State chaos.

HILARY BENN:
(over) I know, Andrew. And the rea… And do you know what the reason why is? Because this was a country that had been brutally oppressed by Saddam over many years and the lid came off. And the majority Shia who had been oppressed by the minority Sunni said well we’re going to change things, and that is difficult. But we were absolutely right a year ago to respond to the request from Haider al-Abadi, the Prime Minister of Iraq, to assist him in trying to deal with Isil Daesh who are of course invading and have occupied parts of Iraq.

ANDREW MARR:
So if Jeremy Corbyn apologises for that war, he won’t be apologising on behalf of his shadow foreign secretary?

HILARY BENN:
I’ve said that clearly we got it wrong and we should be sorry about that because there were no weapons of mass destruction …

ANDREW MARR:
Okay.

HILARY BENN:
… but you can only take a decision, Andrew, on the basis of what you know to be the case or believe to be the case at the time.
ANDREW MARR:
Let me hop to yet another issue, which is there has clearly been quite a change of policy or a change of heart over Labour's attitude in a European referendum; that you are now committed completely as a party to campaign for Yes even if David Cameron gets what you would regard as a party as a kind of banker’s Europe and strips out some of the social protection. How did that come about? What happened?

HILARY BENN:
Well that has always been our policy and actually it’s always been Jeremy’s view because, as you will know, he said during his election campaign “I’m not for walking away. I’m for staying in.” Now what has been discussed this week is how should we react if David Cameron were unwise enough to try and weaken worker protection in Europe, which of course has given us paid holiday, better rights for agency workers, improved maternity and paternity leave? The right thing to do is not to leave the European Union. The right thing is to commit to change that. And the best way you can achieve that is by electing a Labour government in 2020. Britain benefits …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Okay, so you …

HILARY BENN:
(over) … in terms of jobs and security and influence by being part of the European Union.

ANDREW MARR:
Plenty of your colleagues are highly sceptical about the monarchy in this country. Do you think Labour MPs should be obliged to sing the National Anthem on major occasions like the RAF one last week?

HILARY BENN:
I think it’s the wise thing to do, but it’s for individuals to make the choice. That’s what freedom’s about.
ANDREW MARR:
Alright. Hilary Benn, for now thank you very much indeed.

HILARY BENN:
Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS