JEREMY VINE:
Now it is the UK’s turn to host the G8, the annual gathering of the world’s richest nations, and their leaders will be descending on Northern Ireland tomorrow. Russia’s President Putin is coming in early for talks about Syria, the most pressing international issue of the moment, but there’s much else on the summit agenda and I’m joined now by the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. Good morning to you.

NICK CLEGG:
Good morning.

JEREMY VINE:
Let’s start then on Syria. Americans arming the opposition and Putin coming in to presumably tell you that he’s going to go on arming Assad. So it looks very dangerous, doesn’t it?

NICK CLEGG:
It’s obviously a very dangerous situation and I think it causes a lot of anguish if you
like here at home because we see this horror unfolding on our television screens. I mean unimaginable - 93,000 people killed, 6 million people driven from their homes. And the wonderful … you know we’re a nation that wants to do things when we see things that are going wrong around the world, but of course we also don’t want to get and I don’t want us to get embroiled in a military conflict either because you know that’s not what people want. So I think what we’re doing is trying to strike the right balance. I think quite a lot of the debate has in a sense presented a false choice that we either stand on the sidelines wringing our hands, helplessly watching this slaughter unfold doing nothing, or we get you know completely dragged into a military conflict which we can’t sort out, certainly not on our own.

JEREMY VINE:

\textit{(over)} But the Americans have struck a balance of some kind, haven’t they?

NICK CLEGG:

\textit{(over)} Well no, but hang on, can I just … Actually you can strike the balance and we already are of course providing non-lethal assistance. We’re providing armoured 4x4s, we’re providing body armour, we’re providing water purification units, we’re providing communications equipment. That’s the strategy which we are already pursuing because of course we need to try and help the moderate opposition who we’ve already recognised as the legitimate opponents of Assad and the people we hope will be in a position to forge the future of Syria. But we can’t do that on our own. We have to work with the Americans and the French and others …

JEREMY VINE:

\textit{(over)} Sure, but the …

NICK CLEGG:

… and there is in the end of course, there’s certainly no unilateral British military solution. In fact in the end, there is no military solution either. You have to have moderate forces on both sides at some point coming together.

JEREMY VINE:
Okay the Americans have looked at the facts on the ground, which you probably don’t disagree on …

**NICK CLEGG:**

No.

**JEREMY VINE:**

… and they’ve come to a slightly different but significantly different conclusion, which is that they’re going to send arms to the opposition. Now are you thinking that that is what Britain is going to have to do as well?

**NICK CLEGG:**

We don’t need to … We need to work in concert with our allies; we don’t need to all do the identical thing. My point …

**JEREMY VINE:**

You don’t want to?

**NICK CLEGG:**

Well my point was that we are already providing assistance to the opposition. We need to do that. The balance we’re trying to strike - a difficult one - is how do you provide support to people who we have already recognised as the legitimate successors if you like of the Assad regime …

**JEREMY VINE:**

*(over)* But this is a different kind … This is lethal assistance, isn’t it?

**NICK CLEGG:**

*(over)* I know, I know, and I’m saying …

**JEREMY VINE:**

*(over)* Different.

**NICK CLEGG:**

.. we’re providing non-lethal assistance. We’ve taken no decision to provide lethal
assistance, so we clearly don’t think it’s the right to do now, otherwise we would have
decided to do it. What we are doing is providing significant amounts of non-lethal
assistance, which is of a great deal of help to them. And that’s the strategy we’re
pursuing at the moment. That’s what we will discuss with the Americans and the
French and others in the coming days in the context of the G8 summit.

JEREMY VINE:
So to be absolutely clear, you do not believe that Britain should do what America is
now doing …

NICK CLEGG:
No, I …

JEREMY VINE:
… at this point? That’s what you just said.

NICK CLEGG:
At this point, we’re not providing arms.

JEREMY VINE:
And you don’t want to?

NICK CLEGG:
Well if we had wanted to, we would do it. We’re not doing it because …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) Government doesn’t work quite like that, does it?

NICK CLEGG:
Well it does work … No actually we do work collectively on this, and the Prime
Minister and I talk about this on an ongoing basis and we both understand that we’re
trying to strike the right balance between playing a part with other allies to provide
support to the opposition who we think deserve support, so that they can play a
leading role in forging a new Syria, but not at the same time embroiling this country
in a military conflict in a way which I don’t think would be acceptable to the British people.

JEREMY VINE:
So if there were a vote tomorrow on it - and I mention that because William Hague was on this show and he said there would be a vote if arming the opposition was actually being seriously considered - you would vote no?

NICK CLEGG:
What I’m saying is you first take a decision about whether you think something is right or wrong and then you put it to a debate and vote in the House of Commons. We’re not putting it to the House of Commons. In a sense it’s a somewhat academic debate to be having because we haven’t taken that decision.

JEREMY VINE:
It’s quite a straightforward question though: you’d vote no if it was debated on?

NICK CLEGG:
Well you’re asking me a hypothetical question about a vote which is not going to take place right now because we haven’t decided to arm the opposition. What we’re doing is comparing notes with the Americans and others and we’re pursuing the strategy of providing non-lethal support to the opposition.

JEREMY VINE:
Whispers out of Westminster suggest that Mr Cameron is a bit more gung ho on this - he’s got echoes of Libya, he’s thinking that maybe going with the Americans is the right thing - but you’re thinking back to Iraq and the positions your party took on wars that you feel have been vindicated and you’re not going the same direction as him.

NICK CLEGG:
As I say, we’re trying to strike … First I should say this is not like Iraq at all. In fact it’s very significantly different to Libya as well. This is a bloody civil war being
prosecuted by a brutal dictator in the form of Assad, and you know the idea that we can provide a unilateral British military solution to this is fanciful. Of course we can’t. We have to work with other allies to try from the outside to shape events where we best can in order that this bloody conflict gives way to a peaceful reconciliation, but it’s a very difficult balance to strike. It’s not one we can do on our own - we have to do it with the Americans, the French and the others - and we don’t want, of course we don’t, want to ask the British people to send troops if you like and get embroiled in a military conflict which in a sense is not ours to sort.

JEREMY VINE:
Okay so my last question on this is exactly on that point, which is that there are marines, British marines in Jordan, and the papers are getting excited about …

NICK CLEGG:
(over) Yeah, we’re providing training …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) So to be clear, they’re not going into the country or anything like that?

NICK CLEGG:
We’ve been very open. We provide training, we provide assistance, we provide communications equipment - which is a very important component, for instance, in the military operation of the opposition - but we’re not providing lethal equipment and there’s certainly no prospect of us sending in if you like troops onto the ground in Syria.

JEREMY VINE:
Let me ask you about tax avoidance now, the G8 if I can. We learnt this week, didn’t we, that Google has paid 0.1 per cent tax in the last five years. Effectively politicians generally huff and puff, but cannot really do anything about this, can they?

NICK CLEGG:
No, I disagree. I think the debate is changing and changing dramatically. Do I think you can sort everything overnight? Of course not. What we’re having to deal with here is haul tax regimes, which were in fact probably last designed when the Liberals
were last in coalition government many generations ago, before the internet was invented, before globalisation really took root, and we’re having to haul those tax regimes into the 21st century. And there are basically two ways you can do that. The thing that was the focus for instance of the conference that the Prime Minister and I co-hosted yesterday with companies, with NGOs, with many prime ministers and presidents from African countries is to make sure you get a proper exchange between tax regimes. I was talking, for instance, to leaders from Ghana, from Senegal, from Guinea, and they said we don’t really know what tax is owed by the mining and oil and gas companies that are exploiting our natural resources because we can’t compare notes with any other tax jurisdiction about what tax they’re paying there. So we can do a lot on that by exchanging information and we are making real progress on that. And then the second bit of it is to make sure - and this comes to your Google point if you like - is how companies can basically declare that they’re making profits in places where they’re not, or claim that they’re not making profits in places where they are, and that’s something which we’re doing with the French and the Germans in the OECD.

**JEREMY VINE:**
You did have the Chairman of Google, Eric Schmidt, in Downing Street I think a couple of weeks ago. You gave him a telling off, or …?

**NICK CLEGG:**
No, I mean …

**JEREMY VINE:**
What was his demeanour? I mean did you take him down?

**NICK CLEGG:**
Well no, what he says is “Look, you guys make the rules. We’ll abide by the rules.” And I think the point that I made to him was well yes, they’re the rules, but there’s also public sentiment, which is very important - not least of course for the consumers, the customers of Google who want to see people playing by the rules, yes, but also
playing fairly and providing the taxes that are due in those areas where they operate and where they make significant profits. And, look …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) Because I should point out, the MPs who’ve looked at this - Margaret Hodge and co - actually think they’re not even playing by the rules because they think that there are profits made here which are being declared elsewhere. So …

NICK CLEGG:
Well I mean, as you know, there’s an important distinction between tax evasion, which is illegal and of course that’s just wrong, and then there’s aggressive tax avoidance. And much of the fraught debate is about aggressive tax avoidance, which might strictly be legal but is it in the spirit of the law? And that’s, for instance, why we’ve passed something called a general anti-abuse rule, which says you can’t just abide by the crossed T and the dotted I of the law; you’ve also got to abide by the spirit of it. Can I make one final point? This debate about evasion and aggressive tax avoidance, it is behaviour that is not victimless. You know I speak to these African leaders, as I did yesterday, and tax which is not paid fairly in their jurisdictions mean fewer girls going to school, fewer roads being built, more lives being blighted and lost. So we really do need to try and tackle this and I think we are finally getting to grips with this.

JEREMY VINE:
I want to raise the Communications Data Bill with you as well, aimed at snooping on terrorists. You’re worried it’s going to snoop on the rest of us. You saw it off. Do you regret that? You’re being attacked by former home secretaries who think you’ve made a very, very bad call there.

NICK CLEGG:
Well this is former home secretaries who brought us delights like control orders, which have found to be unworkable and disproportionate and had to be replaced, or ninety days you know detention without charge. I think in fact they know from their own experience about the dangers of taking knee-jerk and sometimes excessive decisions in the immediate aftermath of very distressing events. We have to do this in
a balanced, proportionate way. There is more work we must do and we are doing as a government. So, for instance, there’s this issue of how you match individual IP addresses to all these mobile appliances we’ve got at the moment. We will do that work. And of course we need to work voluntarily with the companies and with other jurisdictions like the Americans in order to make sure that we can really use the data that we need to go after people who want to do us harm, but it has to be kept in balance.

JEREMY VINE:
Understood. My question is about Edward Snowden, the guy who’s come out of the CIA and is in Hong Kong and he’s given these secrets away about the American so-called Prism project. I’m assuming he’s a Lib-Dem folk hero and I’m then wondering why you’ve stopped him flying to Britain?

NICK CLEGG:
Well I’m not sure whether he is, but what I think …

JEREMY VINE:
Well you …

NICK CLEGG:
No, what I think this quite rightly raises questions about is how do we in the United Kingdom, our intelligence agencies, how do we process information that is provided to us by the American intelligence services and indeed other intelligence services.

JEREMY VINE:
But why can’t he fly here? What’s he done wrong?

NICK CLEGG:
Well, look, there are legal reasons why, as you know, the Americans feel that they now want to take action against him. But the …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) That’s their problem though.
NICK CLEGG:
But no, hang on, if I may say I actually think there’s a bigger issue of principle at stake: is do we use information - communications data and (even more than that) the content of communications data - in a way that is legal, that is proportionate and is subject to proper checks and balances? And I think the answer is unambiguously that we do. But, but should we then go further - for instance storing details about every single website that you have visited, Jeremy, over the last year, and everybody watching this programme? I think that is a disproportionate and in fact in many important respects unworkable step and that’s why I was not content to go that far.

JEREMY VINE:
Alright, another story in the papers today is about the winter fuel allowance for rich pensioners, so-called rich pensioners. They’re going to go on getting it under the coalition. That includes people who are living in Spain.

NICK CLEGG:
Yeah. Look my views are well known on this. I think the fact that we’re asking people on low incomes to pay through their taxes to basically pay the fuel bills of people who don’t need to heat their homes because they’re living in sunny parts of Europe and maybe didn’t even work here before they retired and worked there - I just think that that lifts the lid on a wider problem in our welfare system, which is yes we need welfare reform. We’ve already made - and with my full support - significant savings to welfare. But if you’re going to make further welfare savings - which I’m prepared to look at - then you’ve got to start at the top. You’ve got to start with welfare for the wealthy, the benefits that are paid to the rich and the retired. It cannot be right …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) Well what’s going wrong inside the Government because you’re Deputy Prime Minister? What’s going on here?

NICK CLEGG:
(over) Well let me, let me be very clear. In the Coalition Agreement we said that during this Parliament, for instance, we would not change the winter fuel payments and TV licences that are paid even for multi-millionaires, right, and paid …
JEREMY VINE:
(over) Oh it was your promise?

NICK CLEGG:
No, that was in the Coal.. The Conservatives wanted that in the Coalition Agreement, so that’s not going to happen. What we’re now debating in the present spending round is what happens after May 2015, particularly that first financial year - a few weeks of which are prior to May 2015, most of which is after the next General Election. My view is very clear: if we are going to carry … if we’re going to do further welfare reform, which I think we’re likely to have to as a country whoever’s in power because it’s about a third of public spending, then you need to start at the top, you need to start having a debate about how we ask people at the very top to change the benefits that they receive. In other words, we need to have a debate about welfare for the wealthy. That is being blocked at the moment because the Conservatives don’t want to have that debate, and that’s why we can’t move forward with the wider reforms to our welfare system.

JEREMY VINE:
So …

NICK CLEGG:
Yes reform welfare, but it must be done fairly.

JEREMY VINE:
So you won’t allow or you won’t as a government hit people at the bottom unless you see people being hit at the top as well. Is that right?

NICK CLEGG:
I don’t think on welfare … Correct. I don’t think on welfare, you can have a debate about the welfare that is provided to people at the bottom if you’re not at the same time prepared to have a debate about the welfare that is provided to the wealthy at the top. That isn’t fair and that’s why I will only proceed with further welfare reform if it
is done fairly.

JEREMY VINE:
Is all well in the coalition family at the moment? We were just struck … Michael Gove, the Education Minister, was on this show a couple of weeks ago. He was asked about childcare policy and why you’d decided to be against it. He made a reference to internal Lib-Dem politics and said “there’s a campaign at the moment being led by Lord Oakeshott to try and destabilise Nick Clegg because Oakeshott wants Vince Cable to succeed, so Nick needs to show the Lib-Dems he’s fighting hard.” Is that the kind of petty nonsense that’s influencing decisions at the highest level?

NICK CLEGG:
No, thankfully David Cameron and I lead this coalition in a sensible and grown-up way. Look Michael Gove was not happy about the fact that I felt it was not justified to ask people who look after little two year old toddlers to look after … for one adult to look after six rather than four. That was just a difference of opinion.

JEREMY VINE:
You’d agreed with it, hadn’t you?

NICK CLEGG:
No, I hadn’t agreed with it actually. We’d agreed that we would ask people whether they thought this was a sensible thing to do and the answer came back very, very loud and clear from nursery providers and from parents they didn’t. I have a rather old-fashioned view that you should create government policy based on the evidence, and if you consult people about what they think, you should at least do the decent thing of listening to what they think and then acting on what they think. So that’s what happened on that. But look, it is a coalition. It’s a strong coalition actually. I think it’s led in a strong way where we’re doing difficult … taking difficult decisions to clear up the mess left by Labour. We will carry on till May 2015. But it is a coalition and a coalition means of course you have differences of opinion between the political parties. No-one should be surprised that a coalition does exactly what it says on the tin, which is govern together in the national interest but at the same time keep the identities of the two parties separate as well.
JEREMY VINE:
Thank you very much indeed, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg.

NICK CLEGG:
Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS