ANDREW MARR:
Attempts to reform the House of Lords has been going on since the Liberal Government shelved its plans before the First World War. The latest plan for an 80 per cent elected chamber with members serving a term of 15 years looks like it’s expiring painfully after a huge Tory revolt in the Commons. David Cameron says one more try at persuading them, but if he can’t persuade them what does that mean for the coalition? Well the former Liberal Democrat Leader, Sir Ming Campbell, is with me now. Good morning.

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
Good morning.

ANDREW MARR:
Let’s just start at the beginning. The coalition agreement says, as I understand it, that it has to be a largely elected second chamber based on PR, and that that will be delivered by the coalition. How important is that?
SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
Well everything that’s in the coalition agreement is important, but of course, as you point out, the Liberal government, Asquith’s government, which tried a hundred years ago to reform the House of Lords and, because of the advent of the First World War, wasn’t able to do so. So it’s a very important part of the liberal approach to government, which is to say that the democratic principle ought to apply both in the House of Commons and in the Upper House.

ANDREW MARR:
So what do you say to those Conservatives who say apart from anything else, the British public really don’t care; it’s not an important issue?

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
Well of course you know politicians are obsessed by the opinion polls. The latest opinion poll about the House of Lords is that something like 70 per cent of the British people think it ought to be reformed and ought to be reformed based on the democratic principle.

ANDREW MARR:
So what happens if it can’t be reformed because Conservative MPs won’t have it?

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
Well just remember this: it’s not just Conservative MPs you’ve got to take account of; it’s the Labour Party. And although I’m disappointed with Conservative MPs that don’t believe in reform, I’m rather dumbfounded by the Labour Party which voted in principle for House of Lords reform but declined to provide support for the programme motion, which would have allowed us to take that reform through and implement it.

ANDREW MARR:
That is because the Labour Party thinks it can smash the coalition in this process.

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
Indeed. Well it’s a pretty ignoble motive, isn’t it, and I can’t help thinking that Robin Cook, who …

ANDREW MARR:
The late, lamented Robin Cook.

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
The late, lamented Robin Cook who knew more about the supremacy of Parliament, but who believed passionately in proportional representation and House of Lords reform will be spinning in his grave somewhere.

ANDREW MARR:
Is it true that if the Conservatives won’t have this, your party won’t have the boundary changes which would give them, it’s said, another twenty seats at the election?

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
Well I’m against tit-for-tat politics. I always have been.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So it’s not true?

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
And I think in relation to a coalition, it’s not pick and mix; or, coin another phrase, I mean coalitions are not just for Christmas. And the purpose of this coalition, as David Cameron has set out today in that article in the Sunday Times to which you referred, was to deal with the economic crisis to try and restore economic stability. Now if there are people around who say well we should break the coalition, I’d just ask them this: do they think that the British public would be impressed by the fact that a minority government, which lasted for three months, would inevitably fall; we’d be back in a General Election, and the consequences for the markets and for confidence and the financial system severely dented? And remember this …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So that means …
SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:

…. and remember this. We’re not exactly top of the opinion polls at the moment and the Tories are 10 per cent behind Labour.

ANDREW MARR:

So that suggests very strongly that Conservative MPs who want to kill off Lords reform can get away with it?

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:

Not at … Well not so far as I’m concerned …

ANDREW MARR:

Well …

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:

… because the Prime Minister has … When you say “get away with it”, you mean stymie it?

ANDREW MARR:

Well I mean they can block it and it will fall and life will go on.

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:

Well I don’t believe that. I don’t think …

ANDREW MARR:

Why not?

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:

Well, for example, because we’re going to spend the … I was listening to the review of the papers. It’s all doom and gloom. How many times at this time of year have you had that kind of week in politics? The recess is about to arrive. There’s an opportunity to put this thing back together in a way which will endorse the fact that over four hundred MPs voted in the House of Commons this week to reform the House of
Lords.

ANDREW MARR:
But if you’re a Conservative opponent of this, then you now know that you can carry on opposing it after the recess and there will not be any consequences.

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
I don’t think you know that. If I …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Well from what you’ve said, that suggests …

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
(over) No, no. Well let me put it this way.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) What consequences would there be if …

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
(over) Well let me put it this way. If you’re a Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament whose seat has been pretty substantially carved up as a result of the proposals for a review of the boundaries, then the idea that you would simply march into the lobbies in support of the Conservative government’s particular anxiety to obtain this piece of legislation is one which may be very hard to swallow. I don’t believe that it can be accepted that we will simply form up in the way that some people think. I think there will be a lot of hard talking going on. And I go back to the point …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So that threat remains?

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
Well I don’t regard it as a threat. I think these are two prongs of the same agreement, the coalition agreement, and I expect the first to be honoured and I expect the second
to be honoured as well.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Right. And presumably this is a matter of absolutely central importance. I mean because one thing that could happen is that both sides of the coalition could walk away. You could walk away from Lords reform and the Conservatives could walk away from boundary commission changes and then carry on.

**SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:**
I think … Well I think both sides of the coalition would find that difficult because they’ve committed themselves. And indeed the coalition as a whole should find that difficult. Why? Because this is part of the coalition agreement …

**ANDREW MARR:**
Yes.

**SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:**
… and, as I said already, you can’t have a coalition on the basis of pick and mix - we’ll have the things which we now like in the agreement, but the things that we don’t.

**ANDREW MARR:**
It has been suggested that there might be some kind of compromise on Lords reform - for instance simply getting rid of the remaining hereditary peers as an interim measure wouldn’t go nearly as far as the coalition agreement.

**SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:**
But we’ve had interim measures for a hundred years.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Yeah, since …

**SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:**
… and it seems to me that if you accept the … I mean one of the interesting features
about all of this - now listen carefully to the speeches made by Conservative
backbenchers opposing reform. Not once did they mention the democratic deficit.
And if you believe in democracy - and this, after all, is a country based on democratic
principles which we seek to export round the world at every opportunity …

ANDREW MARR:
Yes.

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
- then how can you possibly justify a second chamber which is not elected on a
democratic mandate?

ANDREW MARR:
Going ahead, you’re going to be presumably as a party standing on a very different
manifesto from the Conservatives at the next election on all sorts of things - it could
be tuition fees, it could be House of Lords reform again. Are you talking quietly to the
Labour Party as well? Are you keeping those channels open?

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
Well I’m not. And, as you know, I’m no longer the Leader …

ANDREW MARR:
No, no.

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
… so I’m not directly concerned with these things. But let me put it this way, if I may.
I’m a politician of the centre left. I always have been. I’m a politician of centre left
supporting a coalition in which there are people from the centre right. Why? Because
it’s a coalition of necessity - sometimes described as a “marriage of convenience”.
Actually it’s a marriage of inconvenience if the truth be told, but it’s necessary in
order to restore economic stability. And in the next election, I hope that our manifesto
will reflect that centre left position which I believe to be absolutely fundamental, once
we get economic stability restored, to the future of the United Kingdom.
ANDREW MARR:
And do you now regard Ed Miliband as a kind of plausible, electable, serious leader?

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
Well it’s not for me to determine whether he’s plausible or serious or electable. What I do say is that after this week, it’s going to be very difficult for Labour to claim to be a progressive party in favour of progressive politics when they use the question of the programme motion as a means of effectively doing down for the moment the whole idea of Lords reform. They have a lot to answer for.

ANDREW MARR:
And just very quickly. You are on the overall body overseeing the Olympics. How do you react to the G4S scandal, the fact that so close to the Olympics they are so lacking in properly trained people to undertake basic security functions?

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
Well it’s disappointing, but you’ve got Jeremy Hunt coming on in a moment or two and he knows rather more about this than I do. But the one point I would like to make is this. We’ve got 3,500 members of the British Army. The one thing we can be certain of - they’ll do the job. They’re flexible, they’re adaptable, they’ll follow instructions. And of course a lot of the stuff they do now abroad is dealing with the public - looking after … patting people down at checkpoints. Asked to do it…

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So don’t panic.

SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL:
Don’t panic and they’ll do it very well.

ANDREW MARR:
Sir Ming Campbell, thank you very much indeed for joining us.

INTERVIEW ENDS