

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: The work of the BBC, HC 382

Tuesday 28 March 2023

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Members present: Damian Green (in the Chair); Kevin Brennan; Clive Efford; Julie Elliott; Dr Rupa Huq; Simon Jupp; John Nicolson; and Jane Stevenson.

In the absence of the Chair, Damian Green was called to the Chair.

Questions 381 to 495

Witnesses

[I](#): Lord Birt, Former Director-General, BBC.

[II](#): Lord Patten of Barnes, Former Chair, BBC Trust.

Examination of witness

Witness: Lord Birt.

Chair: Welcome to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, looking at BBC impartiality and its handling of the Gary Lineker situation and connected matters, which is the appropriate way to think about it.

Our first witness today is Lord Birt. Thank you very much for coming and giving evidence, given your experience of the pressures of being at the sharp end of the BBC. Given that half the people around this table have worked for the BBC, we will start with declarations of interest. I used to work for the BBC as both a journalist and an outside consultant on policy under your reign.

Simon Jupp: I used to work for the BBC as a local radio manager and journalist.

Dr Rupa Huq: I had a job in Yalding House in the 1990s for BBC Radio 2.

John Nicolson: I was recruited by John Birt and presented "On the Record", the pilot, with Michael Gove, John Rentoul and Martha Kearney. I have no idea what has happened to any of them, but I hope they are okay.

Q381 **Chair:** Thank you all very much. Lord Birt, the obvious opening question is what would you have done differently? If you were still in the hot seat as Director-General, how would you have handled the Gary Lineker tweet?

Lord Birt: That is a very difficult question. I am happy to address the broad issue but, to be honest, I have no detailed knowledge of how events unfurled and I do not know anything about the conversations that I assume took place over very long periods of time and in the immediate aftermath of the current casus belli. I am happy, if you wish, to talk about the issue in general.

Q382 **Chair:** Yes, do. How do you think it has left the BBC?

Lord Birt: If I may, Chair, I will come to that question. Forgive me if I try to set a little of the scene. First, I am a football fan. I am a somewhat chastened football fan because I am a Liverpool supporter but I am a long-time, persistent viewer of "Match of the Day". It is worth starting by saying that Gary Lineker is an exceptional presenter of an important and iconic BBC programme, which, by the way, is exceptionally important to the world of football too. He not only has brilliant presenter skills, but he has wit and brio, and he is a very acute and, dare I say, impartial football analyst.

It is clear from his tweets that he has a coherent and considered set of political beliefs and they are sincerely held convictions. It is worth setting



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the scene in that way. However, I have no doubt that the BBC guidelines are clear in respect of the issue at hand, and I am sorry to say that I think that he breached them.

Q383 Chair: Do you think that disciplinary action was therefore required?

Lord Birt: I am not in a position, as I say, to identify what was appropriate in the circumstances because I do not know what went before, but it is certainly appropriate to call it out and to say what it is. This an important issue and I am happy to explain, if you wish, why I think it is important.

Half the people in this room worked for the BBC, or more. We all know that it is a public body, it is a public service and it is publicly funded. Anyone holding public office accepts constraints on their freedom of expression—civil servants, judges, chief constables, Mr Speaker. Half the people in this room worked for the BBC and obeyed those constraints. They proved too much and you all wanted to go into politics where you could more or less speak your mind, subject to your own party disciplines, which are themselves a constraint on full freedom of speech.

The BBC's commitment over 100 years to a set of values has ensured that this is an institution that is respected and trusted the world over and is seen as being beyond politics—not always succeeding, but always trying to be fair, to be impartial and to be accurate. There is no other organisation and no other institution in the world that has achieved that status.

Therefore, this is not a casual matter. It is a very serious matter and the BBC simply must stand behind the principle of impartiality. Social media did not exist in my day and I did not have to grapple with this issue, but the BBC has to navigate the social media era while absolutely maintaining a firm grip on impartiality. It is necessary that it does it in these circumstances as well.

Q384 Chair: Whatever anyone's views on Gary Lineker's political opinions or the tweet itself, it is pretty clear that the BBC has been damaged by this. Do you think that that damage is serious?

Lord Birt: Plainly, opinion is split. There are people who put freedom of expression at the top and say that it was entirely right that Gary Lineker said this and, therefore, are opposed to the BBC for acting as it did. There are people on the other side of that argument.

I do not ever think that the damage in respect of the BBC is terminal because it has too much credit in the bank. This is an issue that needs resolving and the speedier it is resolved the better. I wish it had been resolved more speedily, but one way or another it will be resolved. We will all move on and I have no doubt whatsoever that at the end of this the BBC's absolute commitment to impartiality will remain intact.

Q385 Jane Stevenson: I defend Gary Lineker's right to have an opinion about



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Government policy and I think that a lot of the press coverage went down the wrong route with it. It was not his opinion, but the way he voiced it, using language that was quite offensive—certainly to some Jewish groups. Comparing something to Nazi Germany in the 1930s is clearly inappropriate. However, I defend his right to free speech. A lot of people are saying that it does not matter because he is a freelancer. Do you think that the public knows which presenters on the BBC are freelance and which are employees?

Lord Birt: I am sure that the public does not even think about it. What it knows is that this is one of the most important BBC programmes and this is a well-established presenter. Yes, he was one of England's great centre forwards, but, let's not kid ourselves, his status, his standing and his power arise, above all else, from presenting this extremely important programme.

I am afraid that I cannot agree with you. While I think that you are right that one part of his comments was way over the top in making a comparison to the Nazi propaganda in the 1930s, I do not agree with your first point, for the reasons that I have already given. I do not think that it is legitimate and right that a BBC presenter of such an important programme should opine.

I ask you to consider the counterfactual. Imagine a presenter of "Strictly" who took a completely different view, was passionately opposed to immigration and said, "Let's put them all back in their boats; immigration is diluting national culture". If we had a presenter who said all those things, a different set of people would be jumping up and down.

I take the same view of both examples. It does not matter whether it comes from the left or the right: I do not think that that is appropriate for a BBC presenter, certainly in the news, which everybody seems to agree with, but also any presenter who is inextricably bound up with an important BBC programme. The guidelines are extremely clear and I am sure you have read them. They plainly cover this situation and it is clear that the expectation is that people like Gary have to obey the rules, and he did not.

Q386 **Jane Stevenson:** He has been warned about not obeying the rules before. Where does that go, if he does not rein it in a bit for next time, if there is no sanction and no punishment?

Lord Birt: Plainly, as I have said already, I have no knowledge at all, except what I glean from newspapers and so on. I have no knowledge at all of what passed before. I suggest that this brouhaha indicates that the situation cannot continue. As an admirer and as a football supporter, I very much hope that Gary Lineker will continue to present "Match of the Day", but I suggest that that has to happen in the context of him agreeing to abide by these very clear guidelines.

Q387 **Jane Stevenson:** When you have a mass walkout of presenters, does



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that not make him untouchable? Can he do what he likes?

Lord Birt: No. As in all workplaces, you have to be guided by principle and the principles are clear. I am very sorry that those people walked out. I am sorry that they did not stop to think and try to understand the issues that we are discussing here and that are at stake—the important issues about the BBC and what it stands for right across the world and in this country. I am sorry that they did not stop and think. Let's hope that there is a happy end to this story. I passionately hope there is, but it has to be based on principle.

Q388 **Jane Stevenson:** Do you feel that that line on employees versus freelancers muddies the water around impartiality rules?

Lord Birt: I do not think that it should. The obligation is exactly the same whatever your employment status. Tim Davie is commissioning a review, as I understand it, as no doubt further efforts will be made to define more closely some of these things that I do not know about because I am pre-social media and the degree to which this is reflected in the contracts of freelancers and so on. That is not a significant issue because anybody employed by the BBC should abide by its guidelines. It is implicit in the deal. I am sure that evidence will benefit from a series of closer definitions of what is allowable and what is not.

Q389 **Jane Stevenson:** Should those definitions apply to absolutely everybody, contracted or employed or any category?

Lord Birt: Absolutely, yes. It is guided by a principle. It is not about your employment status, it is about the BBC. It is about the degree or prominence that you have on the BBC and what it is appropriate to say if you carry that degree of standing and status.

Q390 **Julie Elliott:** Before I ask my question, I want to correct the record. Both of you, Jane Stevenson and Lord Birt, have mentioned the word "Nazi" in what Gary Lineker said, and he did not say that.

Lord Birt: No, I know he did not say that word.

Jane Stevenson: He said 1930s Germany.

Julie Elliott: Talking about inflammatory language, which you referred to, it is very important that we do not add in things.

Jane Stevenson: I will correct the fact that he did not use the term "Nazi", but if you say "1930s Germany" most people know quite clearly what you mean.

Julie Elliott: That is a debatable point, but we do not want to add fuel to any fire here, which we are in danger of doing.

Lord Birt: I take the point, but the meaning was clear.

Q391 **Julie Elliott:** We might have a different interpretation, but anyway.



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Lord Birt, I listened to the way you described the BBC as having too much credit in the bank as to whether this situation that has occurred would cause any long-term damage to the BBC. Could you tell me exactly what you mean by that? I think that the BBC is treading on very thin ice at the moment and I would not say that they have very much credit in the bank at all. I am interested in why you said that.

Lord Birt: Why do you think the BBC is treading on thin ice?

Julie Elliott: I have asked you a question as to why you think that they have too much credit in the bank.

Lord Birt: It is easier for me to answer the question if you explain it.

Julie Elliott: Because of one catastrophe after another.

Lord Birt: Because of 100 years of history. All the data will tell you, and it will have told you for a very long time, in the UK and around the world, that the BBC is a highly esteemed institution. It is esteemed because of what it has done and what it has stood for over a very long time. I am not going to suggest for a moment that this is not a reverse. Unfortunately, the BBC's history is littered with reverses.

However, almost everybody who works for the BBC is trying their best to do a good job, to be accurate, to be fair and to be impartial. Yes, of course they lapse from time to time in small ways and not so small ways, but everybody can see that they are trying. I am not just asserting it—it is manifestly the case, not just in the UK but around the world. I am sure that you have travelled around the world and it is very striking that wherever you are around the world people are huge admirers of the BBC. There is a reason for that.

Q392 **Julie Elliott:** I am a big supporter of the BBC but I do not think that they have much credit in the bank so I will agree to disagree on that comment.

The Serota review into editorial standards, published a year or two ago, was told of the "culture of defensiveness" especially with mistakes at the BBC. Should the corporation be more open to criticism?

Lord Birt: I am going to sound defensive to you here, but all organisations have to be open-minded; they all have to learn from their mistakes and to listen to criticism. I have been exposed to many organisations in my life; it is 23 years since I left the BBC, and I have been exposed to many since. It is inevitable and unavoidable that the BBC, one way or another, has to listen to what the world is saying, because the world is at it the whole time, non-stop.

I was responsible for these things for 13 years and there was not a day where I did not wake up worrying about something or other. Yes, of course sometimes some people resist some things and so on but, at the end of the day, you have regulators. In my day you had governors. You



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have a host of different ways in which people make their views about the BBC clear. Some people will be obdurate when they hear those views and some people will be open-minded, but one way or another the BBC moves on.

Q393 **Julie Elliott:** If we accept that there is this culture of defensiveness in the BBC—

Lord Birt: No, I do not accept that. I do not accept whatever that report said. I would not call it a culture of defensiveness. There is a natural tendency of any institution to think defensively, because it thinks that it is doing a good job. I do not think that the BBC is an outlier at all on this—in fact, quite the opposite. It is probably rather better than most institutions at listening and understanding what is happening in the world and adjusting to it, and its history tells you that.

Q394 **Julie Elliott:** You do not agree with the Serota review, but the Serota review did say that this was its finding.

Lord Birt: I know that the Serota review said that; I am disagreeing with it.

Q395 **Julie Elliott:** I will pose the question in a different way. Let us take what the Serota review says—that it found a culture of defensiveness. If that exists, which you do not accept, but if it did in an organisation like the BBC, what impact do you think that would have on the staff of the organisation?

Lord Birt: That is not an easy question to answer if you do not accept the proposition. Obviously, in a theoretical world—and we have all come across institutions that are out of touch. I have been dealing with one recently and I can think of other institutions that are so out of touch that the staff are extremely demoralised.

I do not work at the BBC any longer; I am exposed to it day to day and in my social life and so on. Of course, if that were true, the staff would be demoralised. I can think of lots of reasons why the BBC staff might be demoralised at the moment, not least the impact of punitive licence fee settlements over these last years and the impact that that is having on the BBC.

My guess is that that is having an even greater impact than anything else. I cannot answer the question because I do not work at the BBC, but I would be very surprised. Most people are getting on with doing their job day by day to the best of their abilities.

Q396 **Kevin Brennan:** Welcome, Lord Birt. I am interested in how the Director-General and Chair relationship works in the BBC. What did you think of your portrayal on “The Crown” in the last series recently?

Lord Birt: Peter Morgan wrote “The Crown” and this is my second exposure to Peter Morgan because he wrote a film called “Frost/Nixon”. I was the producer of David Frost’s interviews with Nixon. I am a great



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admirer of Peter. He is inspired by real events, like Shakespeare, but he then weaves a very powerful narrative to what happened.

Q397 **Kevin Brennan:** How close was the narrative to what actually happened?

Lord Birt: I was, of course, coming to that. Let me just tell you in response to that question where a lot of those scenes were between me and Martin Bashir. I never met Martin Bashir during the whole of that business and I have never met him since.

I am sorry to say in respect of the Chair of the BBC, who I am having very colourful conversations with the whole time, that having had a very good relationship with him for eight years, we had not spoken for the previous year except in formal meetings. The majority of scenes and the direction of travel in that episode of "The Crown" is broadly right. The precise scenes simply never happened.

Q398 **Kevin Brennan:** Did you help Peter Morgan with his research?

Lord Birt: Never. No, no.

Q399 **Kevin Brennan:** During this recent spat—it was a long media run over the Gary Lineker incident; we may not agree about how it was handled, but we can get on to that later—during that whole week the current Chair of the BBC, Richard Sharp, appeared to be AWOL throughout that time. There was no public comment or no sight or sound of him during that week. What did you think of that?

Lord Birt: I regret it. It was an important matter and I would have hoped to hear from the Chair.

Q400 **Kevin Brennan:** Why do you think that he was AWOL?

Lord Birt: I think we all know the answer to that question.

Kevin Brennan: We need it on the record, for our purposes, as a witness.

Lord Birt: Like you, I would be speculating, but obviously—and you may wish to discuss it further—the BBC has a Chair at the moment who is the subject of an inquiry by the Public Appointments Commissioner, and that inquiry has yet to report. You will know, not least because your Committee questioned him and then issued its own report, that there are very substantial issues hanging over his head at the moment that have not been resolved.

Q401 **Kevin Brennan:** As a keen observer of these matters, did you manage to see any of the session that Richard Sharp had in front of this Committee and did you see the findings that this Committee came to?

Lord Birt: Yes, I did. You say it in the plural. I watched one session that you had with him.

Kevin Brennan: The session. Sorry if I said the plural. We have had him



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on other occasions. I am specifically referring to this.

Lord Birt: Yes, and I read your report as well.

Q402 **Kevin Brennan:** Our conclusion from that report was that there was a clear breach of the public appointments procedures in his failing to reveal, at the previous session that we held with him to consider his appointment prior to the final appointment, that there was a clear breach of the rules regarding public appointments. Do you think that our conclusion was accurate and reasonable?

Lord Birt: Yes. If you wish, I am happy to discuss the issue and to start by saying that I do not think that his appointment should stand. He is a person of obvious weight and consequence but in one vital respect he was an unsuitable candidate and the appointment process itself was fatally flawed. I am happy to amplify that if you wish.

Q403 **Kevin Brennan:** Please do.

Lord Birt: One issue that it is not is about his political connections. Everybody in this room will understand that Governments of all kinds will appoint a BBC Chair who enjoys their confidence. However, I would say—and I have known every BBC Chair now for decades—that Governments have a good record in appointing people with an independent cast of mind and somebody who will protect the BBC's independence.

We have used one "i" word so far—impartiality. Independence is another key BBC value. I think that Governments have done that rather well. The next witness after me is Lord Patten, and Lord Patten is a very good example of that—plainly a Conservative but in nobody's pockets, not a political hack or a party hack, a man who will absolutely do the right thing and safeguard the BBC's issues.

However, by his own account, Richard Sharp, while working at No. 10—and this is the account that he shared with you—informed the Prime Minister that he was going to apply for the BBC job. He subsequently agreed to open the way for the Prime Minister's third cousin to guarantee a loan. He then told the Prime Minister that he would clear the process with the Cabinet Secretary, which he did. Seven days after his meeting with the Cabinet Secretary, he is interviewed for the BBC job and a few days later he is appointed by the Prime Minister to that job.

If I may, I have a few observations about that and one that I do not think has been widely made. I think that the Cabinet Secretary made a grave error. When Richard Sharp approached him about the financial arrangement, he should have advised both Richard Sharp and the Prime Minister that the cosiness of these arrangements, already at that point discussed with the Prime Minister, disqualified Richard Sharp as a candidate for the BBC chairmanship. The Cabinet Secretary, in my view, should have advised both him and the Prime Minister of this at that point and suggested that Richard Sharp should withdraw from the process.



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The final issue to note, which I do not recall your Committee looking at, was the composition of the appointments panel itself. It was insufficiently balanced and independent. One issue that I hope this Committee will take up is that we need to return to the world where public appointments in important institutions are consensual, where public bodies are balanced and diverse. That was the situation when I was at the BBC.

We talked about Marmaduke Hussey, who was a very effective Chair of the BBC for much of his time. He had a deputy, Joel Barnett, who had been a Labour Minister. They acted in concert together. Christopher Bland, who was an excellent Chair of the BBC, had a Conservative background and was a fiercely independent man. He had two Vice-Chairs, Gavyn Davies and Barbara Young, both effectively from the Labour—

Q404 **Kevin Brennan:** I know that you can go on with other examples and I think I know the ones that you might be about to refer to.

You made a very interesting point about what the Cabinet Secretary should have done at the point at which Mr Sharp was being considered and when that matter was disclosed. The further compounding of the process was when he appeared before this Committee, with ample opportunity to tell us about the arrangement that he had come to with the Prime Minister, which was not disclosed to this Committee.

This Committee at the time did not object to his appointment on political grounds, on the grounds that he was known to be a donor to the Conservative party. We were concerned that perhaps there was not a sufficiently diverse field and we made that clear in our report on the appointment, but we thought that he crossed the line in being an able individual. However, he did not disclose to this Committee; on top of what you said, it is fairly clear that your view—I am not going to put words in your mouth. Is it your view that at this point he should resign as Chair of the BBC and not await the further report from the Office of the Public Commissioner?

Lord Birt: I think that we have to wait for the report because everything that I have said is based on the evidence as we have it to date, in large part because of the evidence that he gave to this Committee. However, this investigation is taking quite a long time.

Q405 **Kevin Brennan:** There must be some incredible new piece of information that none of us has heard for it to take so long, it seems to me.

Lord Birt: We have to be a bit careful; more may come out that could cast a different light on what happened. The one thing that I will say is that I do not expect that Richard Sharp—I think that he probably very sincerely believed that the matter had been set up by the Cabinet Secretary and that he did not need to reveal it. The person who should absolutely have seen the danger is the Cabinet Secretary.

Q406 **Kevin Brennan:** He may have sincerely believed that, but it was a catastrophic error of judgment not to reveal that matter to the



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Committee, wasn't it?

Lord Birt: They are your words. I have nothing to add to what I have said.

Q407 **Kevin Brennan:** If I take the word "catastrophic" away, would you agree that there is an error of judgment on his part?

Lord Birt: I have already said that he possibly sincerely believed that he had dealt with the matter and had not had much exposure to these kinds of issues. That is why I say that the larger responsibility lay elsewhere.

Q408 **Kevin Brennan:** I do not want to hog the time, but do you think that we have reached the stage where we should reconsider whether the Prime Minister should be responsible for appointing the Chair of the BBC?

Lord Birt: I do not think that the Prime Minister is responsible—

Kevin Brennan: Ultimately, it is the Prime Minister's call.

Lord Birt: Ultimately, and that has been the case for a long time. It would be a big step to say that the Prime Minister cannot have a say, but I have already said that what is going wrong is that we have moved away from the consensual approach of having diverse, independent panels that make a judgment that people accept.

Q409 **Kevin Brennan:** You accept that, provided that the process was no longer nobbled in the way that it has been recently?

Lord Birt: Yes, and I am very confident. I think that William Shawcross is a good appointment. He is a person of great integrity and probity and I very much hope that William Shawcross will get a grip of this issue, not just for the BBC but for other public institutions.

Kevin Brennan: Unfortunately the claws have been drawn from that office since his predecessor was in place, by some of the changes in recent years.

Q410 **John Nicolson:** Good afternoon. I will cover some of the same areas that Kevin Brennan covered. I will start with the Gary Lineker issue. He was told on 10 March that to get back on air he would have to apologise. Three days later the Director-General, Tim Davie, apologised to Gary Lineker—that was some volte-face. He reinstated him without any concessions. That, by any standards, is a humiliating climbdown by the Director-General. In your assessment, watching from outside, how did the BBC bosses get themselves into such a mess?

Lord Birt: I hope you will forgive me if I do not comment on this, for the reason that I gave earlier. I did not know some of the things that you have just mentioned. I hope you feel that I have been very candid about the issues, but having been in these kinds of situations myself, so many things could have happened, so many conversations could have been had. Unless we know all of those things, it is impossible to form a view. Tim Davie has my complete support as the Director-General who put



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impartiality on the agenda. We can recognise that this was a very difficult issue. I regret very much the actions that others took. I understand their sense of solidarity with a mate.

Q411 **John Nicolson:** It was very refreshing, a bit of group solidarity.

Lord Birt: A what, sorry?

John Nicolson: Surely it is quite refreshing to see people standing up for their colleagues and friends. It used to be called trade unionism.

Lord Birt: Yes. Let's say that it is understandable that people do those things. Mr Nicolson, the last thing that I wanted when I was the Director-General—and I was managing these things over a very long period—was having my successors mark my homework, and I am not going to do it.

Q412 **John Nicolson:** You put your finger on it when you said that there was a question mark over freedom of expression and people gauge that and how important it was. Is there not another issue, which is consistency in the application of these rules? Richard Sambrook, ex-head of news who is investigating this, has said that he thinks that there is a difference between people who are BBC staff and people who are freelance. He specifically mentioned people who work outwith the news.

I am having a wee glance here at Lord Sugar's tweets. He has a very nasty tweet where he has a group of African football players and some dodgy-looking fake sunglasses and handbags. He says, "I recognise some of these guys from the beach in Marbella. Multitasking and resourceful chaps". It is a revolting tweet. Then on the day of the election, "You can stop the communist, Jeremy Corbyn. Don't vote Labour". He has since signed a new contract with the BBC.

How can it possibly be that the BBC bosses think that it is okay for one of their freelance presenters of a high-profile, popular programme to recommend that people do not vote for the Labour party but to get their knickers in a twist because Gary Lineker says something about immigration and how cruel the application of the immigration rules are?

Lord Birt: Unlike you, Mr Nicolson, I have not been trawling through everybody's past tweets.

John Nicolson: It took me a nanosecond. I googled "Lord Sugar, Twitter".

Lord Birt: However, let us agree that it is an unhappy situation.

Q413 **John Nicolson:** This is key, isn't it? You have to be fair to people.

Lord Birt: Plainly, social media has crept up on the BBC and there is a bit of backfill going on here trying to sort out what is the right approach. Not everybody is very happy with that approach and not everybody is compliant. All of this points to the need to sort it out. Let's hope that the review does that. Let's bring crystal clarity to this situation.



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I guess from the drive of your questions that that is something that the Committee possibly would like to—let's have crystal clarity. Let's have everybody in the BBC completely understand where they stand. I have already said that I do not think that there is any meaningful distinction between the status of your employment. It is to do with the nature of your employment that matters.

Q414 **John Nicolson:** You were a freelance Director-General at one point, weren't you?

Lord Birt: At the very beginning I was—just very briefly, yes.

John Nicolson: It caused a bit of a stooshie, as I recall.

Lord Birt: Well remembered. Let's agree that it needs sorting out.

Q415 **John Nicolson:** Mr Brennan has also touched on the role of the BBC Chair. You came up with quite a striking quote—this is Richard Sharp. You said that, "He was an unsuitable candidate and his selection was fatally flawed". You also said that perhaps the interview panel and the unfair composition, the skewed composition of the interview panel had not been mentioned. It was. We mentioned it. I specifically raised that because it seemed very skewed.

To clarify, did you from the outset think, looking at Richard Sharp's background, that he was unsuitable? We have all been very distracted by the fact that he facilitated an £800,000 loan for Boris Johnson, the man who then gave him the job, but he had previously given £400,000 to the Conservative party at a time when the economy was struggling and people were living in poverty. It seemed a strange choice for a charitable donation, but he was unambiguously a Tory party supporter, when we already knew that the Director-General was a former Conservative party candidate.

Lord Birt: A long time ago.

John Nicolson: I do not think he has publicly disavowed the Conservative party.

Lord Birt: I am sure you did things in your youth that are mildly embarrassing.

Q416 **John Nicolson:** I am sure there are. However, before I became a journalist I had been politically active but I resigned from the political party when I became a journalist because I thought it was inappropriate.

Lord Birt: Of course, yes.

Q417 **John Nicolson:** Right at the outset were you concerned about his appointment, given the fact that he was a big Conservative party donor and the BBC already had somebody who had been a Conservative party candidate as Director-General? It seemed very top-heavy politically.



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Lord Birt: The latter thing does not trouble me, what Tim Davie did 30 years ago. You have to judge Tim on his track record and I do not think that presents a problem at all. Obviously anybody is bound to be uncomfortable if a political donor to any political party appears to trade that in for office.

Q418 **John Nicolson:** Do you think that that is what happened?

Lord Birt: No, no, no, I do not think that is what happened. That is the perception. No, that is far too crude. I was going to say that somebody who gives funds to a political party is bound to realise questions and therefore the standards of proof are much higher. I do not think that Chris Patten gave hundreds of thousands of pounds to the Conservative party. If he had done, I still would be judging Chris Patten on his merits. I do not take it as absolutely read that just because you give funds to a political party, that debars you. It certainly requires much higher levels of scrutiny.

When I said that there were flaws in the process in suitability, the unsuitability came from the very process of navigating a loan for the Prime Minister at exactly the same time as he was applying for the job at the BBC. It is the cosiness of that arrangement that made it unsuitable and I wish that the Cabinet Secretary had called it out.

Q419 **John Nicolson:** Isn't there a case for changing the system? If we watched this in another country, people would be up in arms about it. If you had a situation where you can donate hundreds of thousands of pounds to a political party and then magically find yourself in the position where you get given this plum appointment, you would be appalled by that, yet it happens in the UK. It is indefensible, surely.

Lord Birt: It is not attractive, but I do not think it follows that everybody who gives a donation to any political party—I do not know who they are, but I am sure that people give donations to the SNP, as they do—

Q420 **John Nicolson:** No. This point is occasionally put. I read an article in *The Spectator* that said that the SNP rewarded donors with plum public service posts. I challenged the author to name a single example, which he could not. I have to say that I declare a position here. I do not think that folk who give large amounts of money should then be rewarded with plum positions. I think that it is unhealthy.

Lord Birt: Broadly speaking, I agree with you. Giving large amounts of money to any political party does not particularly appeal to me. There have been attempts down the years, as you will know, to try to do something about that, but they have failed. Hayden Phillips, if you remember, tried hard to deal with this very, very tricky issue. It is a tricky issue, of course, I agree.

Q421 **John Nicolson:** To pay tribute to "Mrs Merton", Richard Sharp previously applied for a job in the BBC and was not even interviewed. Then he facilitated a large loan for the Prime Minister and—hey presto—he gets the



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top job at the BBC. As Mrs Merton would say, what do you think made the difference between the first unsuccessful application and the highly successful second application following the £800,000 facility?

Lord Birt: I think that it would be stretching things too far to suppose that it was simply the loan itself.

John Nicolson: It was in the gift of Boris Johnson.

Lord Birt: It was only in the gift of Boris Johnson if he had been a successful candidate with the Committee, and he was the successful candidate with the Committee.

Q422 **John Nicolson:** One of the problems with this Committee here is that we could not have stopped the appointment. We could have said that we did not think that he was up to the job and we would still, as elected parliamentarians, have been unable to stop the appointment because the appointment is in the gift of the Prime Minister, in a democracy.

Lord Birt: I am sorry, what would you like me—

Q423 **John Nicolson:** Your look of shock satisfies me.

You mentioned staff morale at the BBC. Staff morale at the BBC is quite low because of some of this, isn't it? You would have expected during the Gary Lineker travails for the BBC Chair to be out defending the BBC and the Director-General, and Richard Sharp was in hiding. The staff finding this very depressing, don't they? I know that you will have contacts among the staff.

Lord Birt: I do, but honestly I am not going to turn myself into an expert on BBC staff morale. I simply do not know. I regard the most significant thing that has happened over the last couple of years, as I said earlier, is an absolutely punitive licence fee settlement, flat at a time when inflation is sky high. That will have a devastating impact on the BBC. The settlement was a year after Richard Sharp was appointed. I have no knowledge of what he did in private to fight for that, which is what you would expect a BBC Chair to do.

John Nicolson: You would expect him to hit the airwaves.

Lord Birt: The important point is that he did not. Whatever he did, he did not win. Despite his closeness to the Prime Minister, he was not able to stop this absolutely punitive thing happening to the BBC.

Q424 **John Nicolson:** One of the things that a lot of staff have mentioned to me is their concerns about what they see as the politicisation or attempted politicisation of the BBC and news. I know that this has happened before. I remember when I used to present BBC "Breakfast", Labour party spin doctors would phone the gallery and try to get the editor to tone down my interviewing. It is has been a long-running issue and different political parties have tried it.



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However, we now have a situation where Robbie Gibb, for instance, sits on the BBC board. Outrageously, he went into the “Newsnight” office—he is a former Tory spin doctor—and lectured the staff there about political impartiality.

Lord Birt: I did not know that.

John Nicolson: When you were Director-General, would you have allowed members of the board to tour your newsroom and lecture your staff about impartiality, given their own clear lack of impartiality? It is terribly patronising, apart from anything else.

Lord Birt: When I was Director-General, there was nothing that I could do to stop the governors of the BBC touring the BBC non-stop. They were not policed so I have absolutely no idea what they did as they perambulated around.

Q425 **John Nicolson:** You would have heard about that, though, wouldn't you?

Lord Birt: I might have done. BBC journalists are big enough and tough enough and experienced enough to put up with that sort of stuff. I do not know all the people on the BBC board but they look good and tough and strong and experienced. I would like to see us return to a situation that I said earlier, where you have a Vice-Chair who clearly comes from the opposite side. If there is a Labour Government and a Labour-friendly Chair, there should be a Conservative-friendly deputy Chair.

Q426 **John Nicolson:** Do you think that Richard Sharp could burst the boil by resigning?

Lord Birt: I honestly think that that is premature.

Q427 **John Nicolson:** We did a very detailed report on this. The idea that the BBC is now doing a report is absurd because the BBC has no power over Richard Sharp's appointment, so that is just kicking it into the long grass. There is no new information to come out.

Lord Birt: We do not know that, Mr Nicolson. We are surely not going to have to wait very long. We do not know what we do not know. It would be premature to do that now.

Q428 **John Nicolson:** Richard Sharp defended Robbie Gibb here at the Committee because Robbie had liked a Tory MP's anti-SNP tweet. It does not matter that it was anti-SNP—it could be any political tweet. In a wonderful “Little Britain” moment, he said to the Committee that he had not actually “liked” the tweet. What had happened was that he had run his finger down the telephonic device and it actually hit the “heart” button, which reminded me of that “Little Britain” sketch and caused much giggling, including the Director-General.

Lord Birt: Robbie Gibb has to be as disciplined as anybody else who works at the BBC, but I have no idea the degree to which he has or has not been. He worked at the BBC and to the best of my knowledge he



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acted properly and was impartial and so on and so forth. The issue for me is not Robbie Gibb; it is the balance of the board.

Q429 **John Nicolson:** I will ask you a final question about the overall apparent drift towards politicised news with channels like GB News, for example. Mr Brennan has made the point several times that if you go through the news channels now you will find high up in the morning Mike Graham, who is a presenter on a very small channel, and he is right there, towards the top, easy to see.

We had Dame Melanie Dawes, the head of Ofcom, before us. She danced on the head of a pin trying to defend a pretty appalling interview where we saw two Tory MPs interviewing the Chancellor about a Tory Budget that was then promoted by the Treasury press office. Is this of concern to you, this Foxisation of our news and current affairs, as somebody who was so keen on rigour and objectivity in your time?

Lord Birt: It is a question that I have thought about but find quite hard to resolve. As you have just suggested, I am very old school, very small "c" conservative. You know what I want from my journalism. I want insight, analysis, rigour, a proper in-depth coverage of the matters that most matter and all sides challenged. You understand that well. The public service broadcasters—they do not always provide that—must continue to broadly work in the environment that we have been discussing since the beginning of this meeting.

The thing that I am unsure of, Mr Nicolson, is the degree to which—obviously we have an analogy here, which is the print world. Paper is not a scarce resource, so for hundreds of years people have been able to print newspapers that correspond to their own particular viewpoint and, providing they stay within the law, to publish. I am uncertain because you could argue that provided that we protect the public service channels, we should recognise that anybody should be free to start their own network.

Do I want to watch that kind of journalism? Not much. Am I scared of it? I am because I see what Fox News does in America. It was one of the reasons why there was a mass attack on the Capitol and an attempt to unseat the elected American Government, so I do not like any of that.

Q430 **John Nicolson:** Do you think that that could happen here?

Lord Birt: I am uncertain. On the one hand I am a liberal. I want people to be able to do their thing and to start things and so on and so forth. There is obviously a good case for arguing for regulating the privileged access that the old terrestrial networks still have. I am unsettled by the issue and uncertain about the issue.

Q431 **John Nicolson:** A few words have entered the English language from the Directors-General of the BBC in its history: one was "Reithian" and the other one was "Birtism". Do you think there is such a thing as "Tim Davie-ism"? If so, what is it?



Lord Birt: That is not fair to Tim. Tim is extremely upright about these matters. Everybody knows he nailed his colours to the mast. He is a profound believer in impartiality and I do not doubt for a second that he will try to do everything that he can to try to fulfil that.

Q432 **Dr Rupa Huq:** You have a very illustrious CV, not only in your BBC years but before that at LWT, and you have had involvement in other private organisations—PayPal, CPA Global and Maltby Capital. With all this wealth of experience, are there lessons for the BBC on governance that could be translated over from other sectors?

Lord Birt: You are going to think me very small “c” conservative again. When I was director of the BBC, in the summer I would get tutored and coached by a business school professor. I once got coached by a very distinguished American business school professor in finance. He had looked at the American stock market over 100 years to identify whether companies survived. He demonstrated that most institutions do not survive. They do not survive because they completely fail to adjust to the changing world around them.

The most important thing about the BBC is that it has survived for 100 years. It has changed the whole time. It migrated the transition from radio to television, it migrated the transition very effectively to the digital age. It was the first broadcaster in the world truly to enter the digital age and to get a huge first-mover advantage on the back of that, when most of the broadcasters were asleep. It has always been a technology pioneer.

The BBC of my childhood, which probably nobody else here experienced—“What’s my Line?” and Dame Isobel Barnett—has all disappeared. The BBC has learnt to adjust to a much more complex society. The big picture tells us that this a highly adaptive and highly successful institution that we all should be deeply proud of. There is no other country in the world that has achieved anything like the BBC. I am sorry to be a proselytiser, but there is an awful lot of mean thoughts around about the BBC, which I think are completely unjustified.

Q433 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I completely agree; I am a big fan of Auntie Beeb. You are right that there has to be a balance of continuity and change. However, with both of these two big recent scandals, Richard Sharp and Gary Lineker, on Richard Sharp we are waiting for an internal report or something.

Lord Birt: And an external report.

Q434 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Yes, and there was our one as well, so there is a plethora of reports. However, is the BBC best placed to be judge and jury; is it right that it should mark its own homework? Is it time for an independent regulator? This morning we had the FA, the Premier League and the EFL. Should there be more independent scrutiny?



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Lord Birt: There is an independent regulator now—Ofcom. When I was at the BBC the governors were the regulators and people thought that they were too close to the management of the organisation and that is why it has completely changed. We now have an integrated board with more conventional, non-executive directors. It is a single body rather than two bodies, which is what it was in my day, and you have an independent regulator.

I have some worries about that because when I read the Ofcom stuff an awful lot of effective regulation in broadcasting is judgmental. I have been around a long time. I have been around longer than anybody around this table so I have a sense of, if you take something like arts programming, a world where “The South Bank Show”—which I was responsible for when I worked at LWT, with others; Melvyn Bragg started it off—told the story of the arts not just of the UK but of the world. The BBC had an excellent equivalent run by Alan Yentob, “Arena” and before that had “Omnibus”.

British television was doing the most extraordinary job in chronicling the arts. “The South Bank Show” has moved off ITV, for reasons that we understand, and the BBC’s investment in arts programming is less than it was, for reasons that it cannot help. People are complaining about the BBC at the moment, BBC Singers and so on, apparently oblivious of the fact of this punitive licence fee settlement.

You may think that I am drifting off the point but I am trying to address your point by saying that regulation is not just about numbers; it is about judgment. Ofcom’s history is tied up with telecoms and science and so on and I fear that it will not be sensitive to the kind of judgments of the old regulators that I grew up with, the IBA—that, by the way, insisted that LWT make an arts programme—and that kind of regulation will disappear. I will make all sorts of qualitative judgments about things that I think are not quite right in the mix. I am sceptical that Ofcom, because of its history, will feel able to do that.

Q435 **Dr Rupa Huq:** For things like complaints, disputes, disciplinaries, that is the BBC, isn’t it? Is that right?

Lord Birt: Yes, but Ofcom is the port of last recall, isn’t it?

Q436 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Theoretically. Quite often it is an internal disputes procedure that comes up with a solution.

Lord Birt: Yes, but at the end of the day it does hold the BBC to account on some important matters. I am not complaining about that. I worry overall about regulation—that there is not enough touch and feel and judgment in it.

Q437 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I want to ask a few more of the editorial influence-type questions. We keep finding, because of leaked WhatsApps and leaked emails, all this stuff about the Government of the day leaning on various media. Matt Hancock asked George Osborne for a nice headline in *The*



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Evening Standard. Then just in recent days we have heard that the word “lockdown” was banned. They wanted to remove the word “false” from the allegation that Keir Starmer had not done anything about Jimmy Savile. The whole thing was concocted and there was pressure from the Government to not make it clear that it was all falsified.

Lord Birt: Mr Nicolson touched on this question, and I did not address it when he spoke. As I said earlier, I was in the firing line for 13 years, which is probably the longest that anybody ever has. I dealt with different political parties in power and was myself the last resort.

Dr Rupa Huq: The lightning rod.

Lord Birt: I never fussed about that, because if you are a robust institution that knows what it thinks, you can deal with any political party on its merits. They are not always wrong. Quite often they are, but quite often they have a perfectly reasonable point to make. The thing is to have a dialogue with them.

I am not in the newsroom now and I have no idea what the tempo is but, as Mr Nicolson pointed out earlier, it was quite fierce when new Labour was in power. I had constant dialogues with Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister, constant dialogues with John Major—not, ironically, with Tony Blair, who never seemed to be very troubled. He left this matter to others. However, they were dialogues and they were reasonable dialogues and you could make your argument back.

I have never said who it was, but I was only once in 13 years threatened by a politician and I told that person where to get off. It did not bother me at all. I felt I had the standing, the status and the power to do that and I did not go anywhere near what that person wanted me to do. I won't use the language here that I used with that person, but that is just life.

Dr Rupa Huq: Two words—one syllable each, maybe?

Lord Birt: That is not something to fuss about. The important thing is that the BBC feels strong enough and confident enough in its values to be able to deal honestly—it is not just about rejection—with complaint and things that the political parties come at it with.

Q438 **Dr Rupa Huq:** There has been a bit of an exodus of a lot of big names from the payroll. Emily Maitlis last summer claimed that, “There's a Tory party agent influencing BBC editorial policy”. That is our friend Robbie Gibb, who was just referred to by John Nicolson. I know that you say that people should be robust and bat these people off, but Lewis Goodall, who is younger, said, “Robbie Gibb made my life hell. People always said, ‘Robbie will get you’.”

Lord Birt: I am 23 years out of it. You are asking me questions that I cannot give you any useful answers on except the theoretical one that I



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have given you. You will have to bring contemporary BBC executives here and ask them.

Q439 **Dr Rupa Huq:** My question is: is this a normal thing that happens all the time under any Government, that they do try to influence?

Lord Birt: I cannot be sure that it is happening in exactly the same form, just as Mr Nicolson himself said. It has been around for a long time. If you think about it, the nature of news changed. In my day the internet started and we had 24-hour news. Before that, there were a limited number of outlets and so on.

The intensity of politics has increased massively over the last 30 years on the back of media change, first 24-hour news and then the internet and now social media. That has changed the discourse very fundamentally. There were not armies of young Spads in the political parties trying to influence hour by hour, day by day the political dialogue.

Q440 **Dr Rupa Huq:** A couple of examples from your day. In 1998 the BBC was banned from mentioning Peter Mandelson's private life. Was that Government pressure?

Lord Birt: No, no, no, absolutely not. I will not go into the details of that but it was a decision made by somebody who I greatly respect—it might be a different decision today—that the fact that Peter was gay was not a suitable matter and it was not relevant.

Dr Rupa Huq: Pressure from—

Lord Birt: No. To be honest with you, I don't remember, but I certainly don't remember any pressure. The person concerned made an honest judgment that a politician's private life was nobody's business. Obviously there was more sensitivity in those days about a politician saying that they were gay than there is now.

Q441 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Another similar one. People are saying that there are double standards over the way that the BBC had a clear editorial line this time around with Qatar when it hosted the World Cup. The opening ceremony was not shown and there was a lot of contempt for that. I was quite little when you were DG. Say South Africa or another regime like that. Did you have an editorial policy in that way?

Lord Birt: I honestly do not recall anything comparable, but my memory may not be up to it.

Q442 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Would you say that it is concerning that it looks like the BBC is self-censoring to avoid the ire of the Government?

Lord Birt: Honestly, I just do not see any sign of that at all; I am sorry.

Q443 **Simon Jupp:** Thanks very much for coming along today. It is great to see you. I want to focus on BBC local radio. It is something that was expanded under your time as the Director-General of the BBC. You will



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have seen recently in the news that the amount of programming of a lot of local radio stations will be halved and on weekends there will not be any local programming at all. Do you think that these cuts to BBC local radio are a mistake?

Lord Birt: Again, you are talking to somebody who does not any longer have the detail at hand. However, as with other questions, I am happy to give you a general response. The first response that I will give you, which I will not be afraid to give over and over again, is that those who criticise the BBC for making cuts should be writing to Nadine Dorries and Boris Johnson first to remind them of the consequence of their actions.

Q444 **Simon Jupp:** If I may interrupt, I fully supported the freeze of the licence fee. I am a former BBC person; these are decisions by the BBC. Yes, there is less money, but it is about what the BBC chooses to focus on and how it decides to use the funding that it has. If I may, my concern is that the BBC is cutting the services closest to the communities that pay for the licence fee. That is a choice by the BBC not the former Culture Secretary or the Prime Minister.

Lord Birt: If you have to cut huge sums out of the BBC's core budgets, there will not be any targets that are easy or comfortable or even right.

To address your question, there is a high-level issue about local journalism and it is not just the BBC. I said that the problem with being a certain age is that you remember the past. You mentioned earlier the fact that I was the director of programmes at LWT. We spent a fortune on our local programming. We had a programme called "The London Programme", which was an extremely well-resourced current affairs programme that investigated corruption in the Met Police and so on. It was well-resourced as a network programme. We had a host of other programmes beside that. We spent almost as much money on our local programmes as we did on our network programmes. Decades later, the reverse in ITV's fortunes means that that no longer happens.

The BBC historically never spent as much money as ITV, because ITV was obviously a regional player and was regulated to spend all that money. Wherever you live, you can see how underpowered local journalism is and how it is failing to deal with all the local and regional issues. I regret that and that is not just a problem with BBC local radio; it is a problem in the television services and in local newspapers. It is an important national issue and I am sorry that this has happened. I am not qualified to give you a chapter and verse response on exactly what the BBC has done.

Q445 **Simon Jupp:** Talking about local journalism for a second, one of the things that the BBC has launched in the last couple of years is the local democracy reporting service. That is using part of the licence fee to install local journalists in areas, who are multimedia journalists. They may be based in a local newspaper or a local radio station that is commercial but they provide copy to the BBC as well. That is one thing



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that addresses some of your points regarding the decline in local journalism, but we all know that it is there.

BBC local radio provides a service that is unique in the marketplace. You will know from your time that BBC local radio expanded under your tenure as the DG, as did commercial radio. Commercial radio had stations popping up all over the country. Most of them are now called Heart and they carry network programming from Leicester Square. Across the board we are losing local programming. The BBC has a part to play here to provide value for money to licence fee payers for a service that no one else can provide. Why is it removing those services from local communities? Again, it is its choice.

Lord Birt: You will have to ask the current Director-General that question. I can agree with you that it would be wonderful to have that. By the way, we saw when Liz Truss was interviewed by lots of BBC local journalists that there is some oomph still left in the system. Honestly, you will have to talk to Tim Davie about that.

Q446 **Simon Jupp:** Absolutely, and I do when he is front of the Committee. The issue here is that if you were faced with the same balance sheet as the BBC has, would you also look to cut the programming closest to the communities that pay for it?

Lord Birt: I cannot see any area of BBC programming that I would relish cutting. In private I might qualify that slightly, but in general I can see no easy ways out for the BBC. The licence fee freeze, which you say you supported, follows on some pretty chilling licence fee settlements over the last 10 years. The BBC is way off the trendline that, to be honest, I bequeathed it, which, by the way, if you remember, was a seven-year deal of RPI plus 1.5%. Imagine that.

Q447 **Simon Jupp:** Do you think that the BBC licence fee has a future?

Lord Birt: I hope so. Of all the things that we have been discussing today—independence and impartiality—the licence fee is one of those pillars. Yes, we can all identify the weaknesses of the licence fee, the lack of progression, but I am paying £13 a month at the minute for my BBC. I am a sports fiend and I like to watch Netflix and when I last counted, to subscribe to Sky and BT Sport is costing me £100 a month, or roughly seven or eight times what I am paying for the BBC. Therefore, it is a fantastic deal and we have to savour it. I hope that this Committee will celebrate it. Yes, we can all address its weaknesses and we can all see how it might be improved, but it has to be celebrated as one of Britain's greatest achievements.

Simon Jupp: On that we completely agree. Thank you.

Q448 **Clive Efford:** I was going to ask you to clarify your position on the BBC. You mentioned the bad settlement several times, but on the BBC licence fee you did not say how you thought that it should be funded going forward. Is there anything about the way that it is funded that you would



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change?

Lord Birt: It is worth looking at whether you can help the poorer parts of society more easily to afford it. That is a legitimate question. Personally, I hope that we could find a way of doing that while maintaining the licence fee, because you remove the licence fee at your peril. I will not repeat all the things that I have said about the institution.

I scheduled ITV at the weekend, "Saturday Night". I was that person and I know how a commercial person thinks and how you have to behave, and it is legitimate and proper. You change the nature of funding and you change the nature of the service. The BBC's achievements are inextricably bound up with the licence fee. You can tinker with it, you can amend it but it should not be changed.

Q449 **Clive Efford:** You were quite clear that you thought that Gary Lineker had broken the code of conduct and it was clear that Tim Davie felt the same, because his initial reaction was that he would be speaking to him and seeking an apology. Do you think that the perception of the politicisation of the BBC weakened Tim Davie's position, which ended up with him apologising to Gary Lineker and not the other way around?

Lord Birt: You may have the edge on me in recalling precisely who said what. What I think happened was that Tim Davie apologised to the licence fee payers for the turmoil around "Match of the Day". If he apologised to Gary Lineker, I am unaware of that.

Q450 **Clive Efford:** Should he also have had his finger on the pulse a little bit more about the feelings of Gary Lineker's colleagues? He walked right into what was effectively a major industrial confrontation.

Lord Birt: I do not agree with that. I have already said that I have no knowledge of the dialogue that must have taken place with Gary Lineker over a long period, so I cannot opine on that. If you run a large institution like the BBC, you have to act out of principle. As soon as you act out of expediency, you are in more trouble than you would otherwise be. You always have to act out of principle, however difficult.

Q451 **Clive Efford:** Do you think that is what was done in this case?

Lord Birt: Again, I am not in a position to discuss the modalities, but I think Tim Davie was entirely right to act on the basis of Gary Lineker having breached the guidelines. I have no view on how it is done and so on, but he was right to act. I have no idea what he thinks. Could he have acted differently? Could he have done it in a different way? I doubt very much he thinks he should have done anything other than call out a manifest breach of the guidelines.

Q452 **Clive Efford:** My question was about being aware of the feelings among the staff or the people who worked around Gary Lineker. There was quite a strong reaction. Should they have had their finger on the pulse a little bit more about that?



Lord Birt: Honestly, you are asking the wrong person. I do understand. When I first worked in ITV, I was in the trade union. I got called out—one out, all out. I was on strike for eight weeks. I had no idea why I was on strike, but I know why people go on strike. Of course, one can understand, appreciate and, indeed, admire the solidarity they showed with Gary Lineker while at the same time saying, “I wish they had worked harder to understand the issue at stake”.

Chair: Thank you very much. That concludes this evidence session. John, thank you very much. That was very enlightening.

Examination of witness

Witness: Lord Patten.

Q453 **Chair:** We move on to an equally distinguished peer—I think all peers are equal in the sight of God: someone else from a different position and also a hugely distinguished past as Chair of the BBC. As a sympathetic outsider these days of the BBC, what would you have done differently through the Gary Lineker furore?

Lord Patten: First of all, I was Chairman of the BBC Trust. I would quite like to have been Chairman of the BBC, because one of the problems that we faced in the trust was the gap between our work on editorial guidelines and so on and the attitude to that of some members of the executive committee of the BBC. That has been sorted out, sort of.

What would I have done? I think it is an unhappy state of affairs, in which the Chairman of the BBC has to be microphone-shy because, for example, of what this Committee reported about him. I happen to think that the Committee’s report about the nature of a conflict of interest, or a perception of conflict of interest, was straightforward common sense. It has obviously had an effect on the Chairman’s position, as in the past was true of what he said about the BBC being subject to liberal bias, a terrible criticism of his own journalists, and what he said about the BBC getting Britain wrong about Brexit. Well, everybody got it wrong, including Mr Gove and Mr Johnson. I think the BBC is in a difficult position when the Chairman cannot play what I think should be the Chairman’s role.

What do I think should have happened? First of all, it has been quite right to celebrate the quality of Gary Lineker as a broadcaster. He is absolutely terrific. I am not a great football fan, but I watched some of the World Cup. I thought the way he expressed decent views about the Gulf States and Qatar during those transmissions was absolutely admirable. I think it was pitch perfect.

His views are so very strong and a free citizen should have free tongues, as I think a Greek philosopher once said, and his tongues happen to be very popular with people. He has a Twitter account and he gets 8.8 million followers. Would that I could say the same. Would that any of us



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could say the same. I imagine that is not just because of his views on football. It is because he says a lot of the things that taxi drivers do not always like—judging by the taxi driver I had today—but things that a lot of other people do like.

In this particular case, I did not understand why people got into such a state of the vapours about what he said and I certainly cannot understand why people say that the reactions to it by some people in the BBC are equivalent to Putin's behaviour in Russia. It seems to me that both propositions are absolutely ridiculous.

The same day that *The Times* newspaper, in a perfectly sensible editorial, said that it thought Mr Lineker was wrong, it also included an article by Martin Samuel, the brilliant sportswriter, in which he pointed out some of the nonsense in it all. First, he noted that the newspaper that was most critical of Gary Lineker's use of the word "Nazi" regularly used the word "Nazi" in referring to people like civil servants or bin collectors.

Q454 Chair: Sorry to interrupt, but we had a difference of opinion earlier on. He, of course, did not use the word "Nazi". He talked about 1930s Germany. We all know what he meant.

Lord Patten: I was going to go on and say that he had not actually used the word in the way it suggested. I think what he had meant was similar to what had happened in the past when, if you opposed a particular act by the Government, you were denounced as being unpatriotic or not British.

If you look at the actual policy, I am delighted now that Mr Sunak, the Prime Minister, has gone to France and I think reached some sort of agreement with the French. It makes up for the fact that—I hate to use the word—thanks to Brexit, they are no longer part of the Dublin agreement that gave us the right to return people, either to the countries that they had come into when they got to the European Union or to other countries. We could send them back. One of the problems now is that we do not have that right.

As for the actual terms of the legislation that the Home Secretary has put forward, I guess I am one of many people who will have to decide in the next few weeks, when it comes up to another place, whether we quite understand how it will help stop people coming or send them back. I had some sympathy with Gary Lineker and I certainly had some sympathy with Martin Samuel, who I referred to earlier, who said that if the policy is so difficult to defend to a football commentator, how robust is it likely to be?

As I said, I think Gary Lineker is a terrific broadcaster, but he is not a member of the BBC staff. There is a difference between Gary Lineker and, for example, an Emily Maitlis. I think that Emily Maitlis is a brilliant broadcaster. Her interview with His Royal Highness—if he still is—the Duke of York, could not have been bettered. She has terrific views and I



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probably agreed with what she said on “Newsnight”, but she was a member of the BBC staff and she probably should not have said it, so Tim Davie was entirely right on that occasion to give her a tap over the knuckles. If he had not done so I am sure Ofcom would have done.

Gary Lineker is not a member of the BBC staff and, if you try to apply judgments to him, do you also apply the same judgment to him, because not very long ago—and I think the last election—he said “Bin Corbyn”? I don’t remember members of the tabloid press then saying how wicked it was that he had made an attack on the leader of the Labour party.

What do you do about Lord Sugar? What do you do about an old colleague of mine, Michael Portillo, who makes wonderful television programmes about railways lines all around the world, thus proving that some railways run and run very efficiently, who also has political views, which he used to express—I do not know whether he still does—very openly on the late night programme?

If you are to have guidelines, if you are to have rules on freelancers, they have to apply to everybody, so what do you do? I think the Chairman should have—we heard the phrase earlier about long grass. Long grass is where you kick the ball and there is much to be said of the attribute, that the French understand better than us, of ambivalence, not ambiguity. I think the Chairman should have said that he was talking to the Director-General about whether they should look again at the guidelines for all freelancers, to try to ensure that things were not said that embarrassed those who were full-time employees of the BBC and did not bring the BBC into disrepute.

It is a long answer to your question, but I don’t think that Gary Lineker is a terrible threat to democracy; indeed, rather the reverse. I notice that at the football matches at the weekend when he wasn’t on “Match of the Day”, a lot of people in the crowd—I am not sure who they were, from blue wall or red wall constituencies; I doubt they were from Millwall—were holding up signs celebrating what he had said about refugees and what he had said in general. This is not the normal behaviour of football crowds, so plainly somebody out there thinks he has said the right thing.

I feel sorry for Tim Davie. I think this was a real example of where a Chairman and board should make life easier for a Director-General.

Q455 Chair: I am interested that you draw a distinction between staff and freelance, which is one of the distinctions that we made, as opposed to the distinction between news reporters or current affairs presenters and sports or Alan Sugar or something.

As we heard earlier from Lord Birt, as far as the viewer is concerned whether Gary Lineker is on the staff of the BBC or not is irrelevant because he appears every Saturday night on a programme watched by millions and you just think of him as a BBC person. I would have thought—and I will be interested in your comments—that there is an easy



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distinction to make that if you are spending your life interviewing politicians, once you start giving your political views that is one thing—

Lord Patten: I think that is a fair point. Maybe you would accommodate that in guidelines, but of course it was slightly more difficult if you were talking about people who are actually presenting the news or presenting a programme like “Newsnight”, which was Emily’s position. I think she is a fantastic journalist but I think she went more than a tad too far, although a lot of people will have agreed with her about Barnard Castle and the goings on at that particular time.

Q456 **Chair:** Divining from your first answer, I get the impression that you think what is needed is much clearer guidelines so that everyone knows where they are. The problem is that, for all the merits of ambivalence, ambiguity in guidelines as to what you can and cannot do as a BBC presenter is not a good thing because we end up in this situation.

Lord Patten: Clarity in guidelines in some respects would make clear that you cannot shut up everybody who is working on the BBC who is not an employee and particularly—as you have made the point—isn’t working on news or current affairs programmes. You are a great chef and you come on the radio or television and you are very popular, you are not an employee but you have very strong views about social security payments and whether people are starving who should be having nice meals. It becomes extremely difficult.

I think you can only deal with it by a degree of flexibility, for which as a country we used to be famous. I repeat that I think there are occasions when not ambiguity but ambivalence has a lot to be said for it, and there is a lot of occasions when the long grass has much to recommend it.

Q457 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Good to see an old St Benny’s alumnus.

Lord Patten: Yes, exactly.

Dr Rupa Huq: I was at Notting Hill girls’ school. We used to borrow a Benny boy every summer for the play.

Anyway, do you think the BBC is a bit inconsistent in how it deals with all these things? It is not clear if these people are contractors or staff. It seems to apply differently to different people, whether things are guidance or an instruction.

Lord Patten: It is inevitable that there are inconsistencies from time to time and you have to manage them as best you can. It will lead to lots of inconsistencies if you have very strict rules about what anybody who makes some programmes for the BBC can subsequently say about the world. I do not see how you have firm guidelines about non-staff or about people who are not doing news and current affairs. I do not know how you can have strong guidelines for those things without actually restricting people’s freedom of speech.

Q458 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Is it inconsistent in what political opinions people are



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holding? You said yourself that the anti-Corbyn stuff was okay, but the anti-Government policy was definitely not.

Lord Patten: Yes, or the pro or anti-Brexit. There is a great deal of inconsistency and there is inconsistency all over the place. We live in strange times when some very odd branches of the media suddenly discover the advantages of the European Convention on Human Rights. That is not the only thing that is odd today.

Q459 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I think that you were an EU Commissioner as well, weren't you?

Lord Patten: I was a European Union Commissioner. I was indeed.

Q460 **Dr Rupa Huq:** A very distinguished CV, of both your lordships. Then, just for consistency, the same questions I asked Lord Birt. We have had all the examples recently of interference from the Government. Did that used to happen in your day? Do you recall this happening in your era?

Lord Patten: That it has happened in the past is undoubtedly the case. The BBC Trust resulted in part from an argument between the Government and the BBC, because during the deplorable beginnings of the Iraq war the BBC got wrong pretty well the only thing the Government got right. The Andrew Gilligan report on the "Today" programme led to the Hutton inquiry, which led to heads being chopped off and to the view that what was needed was some sort of body over the BBC that would have oversight of editorial matters, editorial guidelines and other related issues, which would work for the licence fee payer.

I think we did a lot of that very well, but we did not have control over the BBC executive. That was always a bit of a weakness because when things went wrong—we were there during the awful Savile business and when that was going on it was sometimes difficult to know who was actually responsible in the BBC executive. It was a question of Macavity who kept on disappearing or appearing. Therefore, it did not really work in that sense.

I think it produced some wonderful work and people should quite properly commend the Serota report. We did a lot of that at the BBC and sometimes got into trouble because of the amount we did with the audience. We did a lot of work on reporting of science, which touched on climate change, the Arab Spring, gender, the role of the nations and so on. It was very good work but it wasn't always entirely appreciated by the executive.

I agree with what John said earlier about Ofcom. People had doubts about Ofcom and thought that it would play the BBC off against other organisations and I think that has all been wrong. Its mid-term report on the BBC was exemplary, and very good for the BBC and the coverage of news and so on, so I think it has done a very good job.



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Has the BBC board been as robust as it should have been? I don't think it has. If I had been Chairman of the BBC Trust or BBC board I would have had some reservations, even though in my not so glorious past I was a Chairman of the Conservative party. I would have had some difficulty about accepting as a member of the board somebody who had been director of communications for the Government or for the Conservative party, so I think I would have had some problems about that.

The board has to behave like a board and sometimes give cover to the executives like Tim Davie, who I think is an outstanding Director-General at a very difficult time. Everything John Birt said about the financial squeeze is true.

I have just been in Australia lecturing at some universities. When I look at the ABC and the way it has been driven out of areas like sport because of the rotten financial settlements it has, I would hate to see that happening with the BBC.

Q461 **Dr Rupa Huq:** You would say that the Robbie Gibb appointment is questionable, because he is on record as saying, before he was appointed, "BBC full of pinko tongs"—maybe not quite those words, but—

Lord Patten: Unfortunately, not long before *The Sunday Times* produced reports about loans and help with loans, the present Chairman said that he thought that there was a liberal bias in the BBC, as I said, and said that he thought that the BBC had not really understood the world that had produced Brexit. I think both of those were extremely unfortunate and unwise statements, so it wasn't just Robbie Gibb.

Q462 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Do you think that there was an era when politicians, Lord Birt and yourself, were more consensual and now you have these sort of rottweiler figures, channels like the extreme right ones that do not even pretend to be balanced?

Lord Patten: It cannot have felt very consensual when you were having to defend the BBC for allowing broadcasts with members of the IRA expressing their views, but I know what you mean.

Q463 **Dr Rupa Huq:** You were known as a wet.

Lord Patten: I have to be careful that I do not sound as though I want to take the clock back to the 19th century, but one thing that has happened with social media and the internet is that, while to some extent debate and knowledge has been democratised, it has also in many respects been debased in the way in which it has encouraged identity politics.

You were discussing in the earlier session about some of the new television stations or television programmes that give people of a certain political opinion the opportunity to have their political opinion endorsed and loved every morning, but I hope that we do not want to fetch up with a broadcaster like Fox News dominating the airwaves of this country.



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Q464 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Lastly, you are on record as saying that there is sometimes too much meddling, about political interference. Is that time now?

Lord Patten: I think that there has been meddling. I was surprised to hear it suggested that Tony Blair never had anything to do with it. I think Alastair Campbell probably did. I would be surprised if he hadn't.

When I was Chairman of the BBC Trust, I had absolutely no serious arguments about my relationship with the Government. I used to go to see the Prime Minister regularly, usually with the Director-General. The then Prime Minister, David Cameron, was usually more interested in what had happened in the last edition of "Sherlock" than in any of the political things that we were supposed to be bothered about. There was only one occasion when I think some of the Spads in No. 10 were trying to put somebody on the board who I thought was thoroughly unsuitable. I am glad to say that the process left him where he was, not on the board.

Q465 **Julie Elliott:** It is fascinating listening to your insight on this, but it sounds to me like you are describing at the minute that the board is a little bit dysfunctional with the Chair in the position that he is in.

Lord Patten: I think it is unfortunate if the Chair cannot appear and be out there batting for the BBC. That is what the Chair should be doing. It is more important for the Chairman to be doing that than the Director-General. Everybody expects the Director-General to do it, but it is for the Chairman to point out how impartial the BBC is, what its ratings are for trust and fairness, how it is admired around the world. It is for the Chairman to point out the danger, which we are starting to see, that other media and other organisations in other countries are starting to worry that the BBC is simply becoming a Government or a state broadcaster. That has not been the position of the BBC in the past, but if you look at *The New York Times* on this you start to worry.

Q466 **Julie Elliott:** I want to ask you, Lord Patten, what I asked Lord Birt. The Serota review into editorial standards, which you have mentioned, was told of the "culture of defensiveness" in the organisation, especially for mistakes at the BBC. Do you think that the corporation be more open to criticism?

Lord Patten: It is hugely open to criticism. I think it should be more open to praise really, because of what you were saying earlier about the value for money from the BBC. You pay less every day for the BBC than you pay for *The Sun* or the *Daily Mail*. You pay half as much on a Saturday when their prices go up. It is incredibly good value for money and I think that needs to be said more frequently.

It comes back to this complicated question of impartiality. Nothing in the charter talks about the BBC's impartiality; the charter talks about the BBC's due impartiality. Impartiality isn't just about finding a middle point between two propositions. You have to take the context into account, and I think that is something the BBC should try to explain rather more.



Q467 **Julie Elliott:** Perhaps the question is not the right question. It should not be about whether the corporation should be more open to criticism but about whether it should be open to more discussion about its place and its views.

Lord Patten: I think the audience, councils, the regional bodies and so on and the licence fee payers as a whole need to be consulted much more, and we did a lot of that at the BBC Trust. Indeed, I remember there was one occasion when a very distinguished Labour MP criticised my predecessor for saying that he represented the BBC licence fee payers in what he was saying, which was critical of the Government, and the then Chairman, Michael Lyons—he was a very good man—was criticised for it. Yes, the BBC should be as open as possible but not defensively so because I do not think the BBC has much to protest about in what it is doing.

Q468 **Julie Elliott:** What impact do you think the culture of defensiveness that the Serota review found is having on BBC staff at the moment?

Lord Patten: I hope not much but it probably does, as does the endless succession of accusations that it is somehow a leftie organisation. The story about Partygate was largely broken and run by ITV, and it did a brilliant story, let's be honest. It was a brilliant piece of journalism. What happened? The then Prime Minister attacked the BBC for being so partisan, and I think he even used the word "vengeful" in its pursuit of the story, but it was ITV. The BBC then followed it up. It was ITV that had started it all.

It is a convenient thing for politicians to do. I think I did it once when I was party Chairman and felt ashamed of myself afterwards, quite often because your supporters want you to do it, "Oh, it's the Beeb, it's that left-wing Beeb". The BBC is spectacularly impartial and in really difficult areas. We had to deal with, for example, the question of whether climate change was man made or not. There was a group of people, including a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, who argued against that. We had to make the point that you didn't just fetch up demonstrating impartiality by giving equal time to both sides, because one side was plainly bananas and most of the scientists were clearly convinced on the other side.

Think of the anti-vaxxers. Why was there so little support for the anti-vaxxers in this country? Partly, I think, because of the wonderful job that the BBC did in explaining the vaccine, with two health correspondents who knew what they were talking about, and using some of our scientists from Oxford brilliantly: Sarah Gilbert, John Bell, Andy Pollard. They did a fantastic job and I think one result was that more people were prepared to take vaccines. That, of course, helped the Government to achieve their excellent targets, but I think that was partly the public education role of the BBC.

Q469 **Kevin Brennan:** Welcome, Lord Patten. On the Lineker matter, from what you have said, do you think that we should just drop the whole



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pretence that people who are working freelance for the BBC, are not involved in news and current affairs, should be expected to conform to rules about impartiality in their lives outside of the BBC? Is that not just nonsense?

Lord Patten: I think that it is very difficult to have a 10 commandments, to have things chiselled in stone that apply to everybody. It is much more a question of quiet words and encouraging people to understand that if they go too far, it will be bad for their colleagues and bad for the organisation that helps pay their—

Q470 **Kevin Brennan:** The problem is it is impossible to draw the line, isn't it? You are suggesting that what is best here is a fudge, if I could put it that way.

Lord Patten: I am suggesting a way in which the world very often should operate sensibly. In this country we do not have a written constitution. There is a profound sense—or there was—of what is appropriate behaviour and what is not. Very often that involves fudging, winks and nudges and an elbow in the ribs. That is the way we have operated, thank God. Our most distinguished contemporary political historian has made that point very eloquently, quoting, I think, a Home Office official in saying that. People used to know how to behave and you do not have to have rules for everything.

Q471 **Kevin Brennan:** But as was pointed out earlier, social media has changed the game considerably in that regard and Gary Lineker is someone with a very large number of followers.

Is it not the case that if the BBC continues down this pathway of trying to regulate what people who are not involved in news and current affairs say on their social media platforms, they will encounter this again and again and tie themselves into knots? There are lots of BBC presenters who do this sort of thing all the time, who are working freelance for the BBC, and the best thing to do is to ignore it, isn't it? Who cares what a footballer says about this particular—

Lord Patten: We have been ignoring it in the past. I gave some examples and I could give a lot more. There was a very good piece, dare I say, in *The Observer*, which went through a list of things that freelancers had said in the last few years. Were we to try to stop everything, we would not be employing Lord Sugar to say, "You're fired". We would not be employing a lot of other people. It is difficult. I think we best deal with these things by being sensible and by encouraging people from time to time when they go over the line to be careful.

Q472 **Kevin Brennan:** Talking to this review, would not the best be to say that the BBC is looking again at these guidelines, accepting that the way they are written are unenforceable and will always remain so, and that it is best to just encourage people not to do this sort of thing, but not to go around threatening them with the sack, pulling them off the air every time they happen to express an opinion?



Lord Patten: I think that you have put the point very well.

- Q473 **Kevin Brennan:** You have said some things publicly about the Chair of the BBC. I have to say that I felt a sense of betrayal. Richard Sharp appeared before us, after this Committee had in good faith said that it would not oppose his appointment as the Chair of the BBC in his pre-appointment hearing in front of the Committee, because we thought that all issues had been revealed, including his political allegiances and donations and so on. Yet we subsequently found out that he had been involved in this business of facilitating a loan to the Prime Minister ultimately responsible for his appointment. How would you describe Richard Sharp's current position in all of that as Chair of the BBC?

Lord Patten: Difficult.

- Q474 **Kevin Brennan:** Is it untenable?

Lord Patten: I am loath to use adjectives or strong nouns when what really matters is verbs. I would find it very difficult to be in his position and I hope that I would not have fudged the meaning of a conflict of interest or the perception of a conflict of interest. It must confuse a lot of people who work for the BBC, just as it confuses innocent bystanders like me.

- Q475 **Kevin Brennan:** If I am only allowed to use verbs, "resign" is quite a strong verb. Is that one that you would want to deploy in this instance?

Lord Patten: I have tended in life not to go around telling other people to resign, but were he to do so I do not think I would write a letter of condolence.

- Q476 **Kevin Brennan:** Thank you. What do you think about the role that has been attributed to Robbie Gibb in all of this as a member of the board? I think earlier you suggested that had you been Chair and his name had been suggested as someone to be appointed to the board, you would have done what you did when David Cameron was Prime Minister and some Spads in No. 10 had recommended—

Lord Patten: If it had been me, it would have looked particularly suspect anyway because people would say, "He used to be Chairman of the Conservative party, so he is trying to put Conservative officials into all the most senior jobs". Again, it is a matter of perception and what things look like. I do not know what he has or has not been up to in the BBC. You know more about it than I do—meetings with journalists and things he has allegedly said. But I think that it is unfortunate that an organisation respected around the world for being independent, impartial and a different creature to a Government or a national broadcaster has been slightly shadowed by these issues.

- Q477 **Kevin Brennan:** Does his appointment—or indeed would the appointment of anyone else whatever their political leanings with a similar background—risk the corporation's reputation? I think that you



were just suggesting that it probably does.

Lord Patten: I think that it risks the reputation of the BBC as being a public service broadcaster of spectacular integrity and independence, which is the reputation around the world. People do not sit watching the television in Italy thinking, "God, thank goodness we have the RAI and not the BBC". They do not do that in France or other countries. They do not do it, I am sure, in the United States and say, "Thank God we have Fox".

Q478 **Kevin Brennan:** What is your view about the whole business of the Prime Minister appointing the Chair of the BBC? Do you think that is a useful part of our procedures for public broadcasting?

Lord Patten: I think that it is inevitable, but it is right that this Committee should have a say. Although you have not asked me about it, I happen to think that this Committee should have a very strong say in the licence fee settlement.

I would much prefer the licence fee to be determined by this Select Committee and the Treasury Select Committee than by a Minister. Ministers would be protected from the suggestion that they were holding the licence fee settlement over the head of the BBC to try to get them to dance to their tune. It applies to both parties. I do not think it is just right-wing parties or Governments that have put pressure on the BBC from time to time.

Q479 **Kevin Brennan:** There have been significant erosions in the rules around public appointments in recent years—not just for the Chair of the BBC—and certainly they are different from the time you were Chair of the BBC Trust. They were done differently by the Government. They wanted to have Ministers to have a greater say in a number of public appointments.

Do you think that perhaps we ought to return to the pre-2015 situation—I think that was when the rules were changed—when Ministers were not involved in the appointments process until after the panel had selected candidates who were deemed to be over the line?

Lord Patten: I think that it is unfortunate if, after a panel has come to review, Ministers try to interfere with it. It is unfortunate if a panel takes a view that somebody is not a suitable candidate for a job and then that person's name is run again and again in the hope that sooner or later the panel will back off.

People like Peter Riddell did an admirable job in trying to ensure that our appointments system was as clean as possible. It would be a very unfortunate set of circumstances if that failed to be the case because if you are a Conservative Government and you are thought to be doing that, sooner or later you will not be a Conservative Government. You will be a Labour Government. If the Labour Government goes and does the same thing because of what you have done, you have no reason for



arguing. You have nothing to complain about because sauce for the goose and sauce for the gander and so on.

- Q480 **Kevin Brennan:** Finally from me, William Shawcross has recused himself from coming to a judgment as Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments over whether or not Richard Sharp breached the procedures during his appointment process and has appointed somebody else independent to do that job. Do you have any insight into why that is taking so long? Some members of this Committee are perplexed as to why this is not a relatively straightforward matter, given that we considered it ourselves in some considerable detail.

Lord Patten: I have considerable regard for William Shawcross, despite his views on the European Union. I think that he was an admirable journalist and I am sure he is an admirable public servant. But I do not think it takes William Shawcross, whether recused or not, to understand a conflict of interest or a perception of a conflict of interest when it is bashing him over the head with a truncheon. I think this Committee was admirably clear on that particular subject.

I have never met Richard Sharp and I am sorry to sound so critical, but it seemed to me to be a clear example of the value of Select Committees and the importance of behaving within the code of conduct they find acceptable.

- Q481 **John Nicolson:** Thank you for joining us. I will be brief because you have covered most of the issues.

To summarise on the Gary Lineker issue, your concern seems to be consistency, very reasonably. The BBC has not been consistent. Lord Sugar can post very unpleasant things and nothing happens to him. Gary Lineker posts something also outwith news, like Lord Sugar, and he gets taken off air. That is your primary concern. Is that correct?

Lord Patten: That is my reason. I also happen to think that Gary Lineker, as well as being a very good broadcaster, is highly intelligent and does not say things that are not the result of a good deal of reason and assembly of evidence, I am sure.

- Q482 **John Nicolson:** I was on that late-night Thursday programme you mentioned regularly with Andrew Neil, and you are absolutely right, Michael Portillo and I used to lock horns all the time.

Lord Patten: I do not want to suggest that Michael Portillo is other than a highly intelligent man with a great deal of integrity, but he has, understandably, given his position—he used to be my deputy when I was Environment Secretary about 100 years ago. He is a much more obvious spokesman for Conservative positions than, say, I am.

John Nicolson: I remember he told me at one point that he never imagined that his life would take this particular route from a hard-right politician to, as he described himself, a national treasure. That is what he



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thought that he had become. Sweet, I thought.

Lord Patten: I recruited him from Cambridge.

Q483 **John Nicolson:** Has Richard Sharp become so compromised now that he should stand down?

Lord Patten: I do not think I can add anything to what I have said. To repeat what I said, I would find it difficult to go out and do a news conference defending the BBC's due impartiality at the moment if I was in his boots. That is unfortunate because I think that is what he should be doing.

I think that Tim Davie is a terrific guy and has a difficult job to do and will do it very well, just as he looked after radio very well and other things. There are some occasions when, as a chief executive, you have a right to have the Chairman's hand on your shoulder and the Chairman taking some of the flak. I think that is what Chairmen are supposed to do.

Q484 **John Nicolson:** It is time that one of the party leaders came forward and said, "You know what, we have to clean up politics. We have to separate these big public roles from party donors because it is too crude. There is too obvious a link." It has happened for years in the Lords, as we know. You give a big donation and you end up in the Lords. We see it time and time again.

That is probably quite hard for Keir Starmer to tackle because so many folk want to get into the Lords, but on this, for instance, it would be a good thing if he were to come forward, wouldn't it? I think it would be a good thing if he was to come forward and say, "You know what, in the future you would be allowed to give hundreds of pounds to a political party, but if you are talking about tens of thousands of pounds, which then magically results apparently in you getting a job heading up a big organisation, that doesn't look good".

Lord Patten: I think that money has corroded American politics to a terrible extent, and it would be terrible if the same thing started to happen here. As I said, I was Chairman of the Conservative party many years ago. I have always been in favour of state funding of political parties because I think money brings with it all sorts of undesirable complications.

Q485 **John Nicolson:** You talked about the role of this Committee. I love being on this Committee. You get to talk to interesting people and to shine a light on areas of public life that require that, but one of the areas of this Committee that always seems bizarre to me is that we can sit and interview a candidate for a job and then, when the candidate leaves, we will sit and chat about that candidate and there is no possibility for us to prevent that candidate from getting the job. No wonder sometimes they look so smugly complacent and comfortable when they sit before us. Do you think that this Committee should have the power of veto?



Lord Patten: Let me say something about not just this Committee but other Committees. The first quasi-job in politics that I had was a PPS to Norman St John-Stevas, who set this up. I think that it was one of the most important institutional changes that any politician has made in the last few years.

While I think there is much about Parliament that frankly does not work any more—attendance in the Chamber is sometimes derisory—Select Committees do work and we should build on the success that Select Committees have had. It strengthens democracy and gives Members of Parliament much more interesting roles than they would otherwise have. When I was a European Commissioner, I used to feel that it was noticeable how much more power members of European Parliament Committees had than members of Committees at Westminster. I think that is unfortunate.

Q486 **John Nicolson:** What is the answer to the question? Should this Committee be given a veto?

Lord Patten: I think that giving Committees a veto is difficult because they do not always have that in American congressional committees. They sometimes do, but I would not be closed mind to it. I had to appear in front of this Committee when I was proposed for Chairman of the BBC Trust and I had a pretty good row with one or two members of the Committee who were somewhere to the right of me, which was not perhaps difficult. If, at the end of the day, they said, "We cannot stand having this guy", I would have understood it. Fortunately, they did not.

Q487 **John Nicolson:** You have made it very clear that you find the idea of us drifting towards the right in broadcasting with Fox News output pretty unpalatable. With Lord Birt, I mentioned GB News, which recently had two Tory MPs interviewing a Tory Chancellor about a Tory Budget, which was then promoted on the Treasury website. When I challenged the head of Ofcom, she wriggled horribly and did not seem to know how to answer the question. I notice it has been given a lot of attention. Do you think that Ofcom is performing its role adequately at the moment if it cannot issue a ruling on something that seems so egregious?

Lord Patten: I have never seen GB News and I do not intend to. But as I said earlier, one of the unfortunate consequences of the development of social media is that it encourages people to think that living in a silo is the same as behaving as a citizen. It tends to undermine, indeed destroy, civic humanism and encourages a more restricted and introverted way of looking at what is going on in the world.

I suppose that accounts for Fox and some of the other programmes that are being set up here and some of the panels of people who take part in them. My own reaction is that I always refuse to go on them because I prefer to be quizzed on the "Today" programme or by Andrew Marr or somebody.



Q488 **John Nicolson:** Sitting and watching Nadine Dorries's interview with Boris Johnson I think is one for enthusiasts or opponents of the genre to watch. On the question of Ofcom's performance, it does not seem to be doing anything at all to stop this drift. It is more than a drift; it is a rampage.

Lord Patten: I honestly cannot answer that. I can answer the question of whether I think that Ofcom has done a decent job with the BBC. I think that it has. Some of the dire predictions that were made about how Ofcom was likely to behave towards the BBC have been proved completely untrue and I repeat that I think that its mid-term review of the BBC's news coverage was exemplary.

I will add one point about editorial guidelines, which although Ofcom would be interested in it, does not refer to its role. It refers to the Serota report. I think that the work as a result of the Serota report—which Andrew Dilnot has done with others—on reporting of economics on the BBC is admirable and the sort of thing a broadcaster should welcome. I am not sure it would be terribly welcome by some of the broadcasters that you are understandably concerned about.

Q489 **Simon Jupp:** Thank you very much for coming in front of us today. It is much appreciated. In the last session, I talked about BBC local radio. If I may, I will indulge myself again. Do you think the widespread cuts to BBC local radio that have been announced by the BBC in the last six months are a mistake?

Lord Patten: I repeat what John Birt said—in a way what I said earlier. I have no doubt about the importance of local radio. It is not just in this country but it is elsewhere too. When things go wrong, people tend to listen to their local radio station to find out what they should do. That is true, not just here, but I remember that after the Fukushima disaster, there was a lot of evidence that people had been prepared to listen to their local radio station and know what to do after the nuclear problem, rather than anybody else. There was a degree of trust of local radio stations, which is very important in a democracy.

Should the BBC make sure that it preserves local radio stations at all costs? I am sure it would like to. Should it preserve at all costs orchestras and choirs? I am sure it would like to. Should it be able to go on televising as much sport as it does today? I am sure it would like to, but it needs a better settlement. Their settlements have been dire. Also, they have had a political invective attached to them, which is unfortunate. The last Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport said some things about the BBC on the licence fee that I think should be regarded as unacceptable.

Chair: I think to be fair, that was her predecessor. There have been several.



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Lord Patten: Sorry. I think you have no doubt about to whom I am referring.

Simon Jupp: There have been incremental improvements.

Lord Patten: They do come and go, as do Education Secretaries. In the last seven years, we have had nine, I think.

Q490 **Simon Jupp:** We hope we will have more stability in the future, but the issue is that BBC local radio is unique in the marketplace nowadays. If we go back in time, you had loads of commercial radio stations providing local news services and local programming. They have all but gone and been replaced by homogenous network programming from Leicester Square or other places. They have their part to play, but they are not local.

BBC has a unique role in the marketplace now. It perhaps did not want that place in the market but it has it anyway. I am concerned that the BBC get off too lightly when it decides to cut these sorts of programmes.

Lord Patten: Yes, but it is really difficult. I guess that the BBC at the moment has to make difficult decisions about whether to continue with both BBC One and BBC Two, whether to continue with Four and so on. These are difficult decisions when you have as little money as it has. I have a son-in-law who is an actor and listening to the difference in resourcing something for other television companies or film companies and the BBC is pretty shocking. I think that the BBC does a remarkable job with, as I said, us paying less every day than it costs to buy *The Daily Mail*.

Q491 **Simon Jupp:** Of course, when you talk about the licence fee—and Lord Birt talked about Netflix and other things—Netflix and other providers like that do not provide local news. There is no local news on there in the evening on Netflix or whatever it is, and the BBC does. Local programming is key to the future of the BBC, isn't it? Why harm that USP?

Lord Patten: That is true. If you say we should have a BBC that should not try to make programmes like "Happy Valley" since Netflix is making all these programmes, I think you would—

Q492 **Simon Jupp:** I am not saying that; I am just saying it has a USP in local programming. ITV still does regional news in the evening, but it has that USP. The point I am trying to make is that we have a sense that the BBC can seem quite distant from certain communities that I represent but the local programming makes up for that. I think that it is such a shame we are losing those local voices, local programmes and local news.

Lord Patten: I would be amazed if the Director-General of the BBC did not also think it was a shame that we were likely to lose those things, but he would probably give you a list as long as your arm of the other things the BBC is likely to lose unless it is better funded.



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Can I make one other point, a point on which the Chairman has been, I am pleased, very clear? I am talking about the role of the World Service in our global reach and dealing with the sense in the south of the globe that liberal democracies are hypocrites and do not concern themselves with what is happening there. I think that it is a very good example of why we should be spending more money on the World Service as well as on local radio, but you cannot do those things and also run all the other services and try to compete with Netflix and so on.

I have no idea what I pay for these other channels, but I do. I pay an inordinate amount of money because I like watching cricket and am exasperated when, even though I spend a lot of money, I still cannot watch cricket when it is on yet another paying channel.

Q493 Simon Jupp: The BBC gets criticised by people on both sides of the political spectrum for being biased against them, which is hilarious in many ways, but it also faces a question of its future with the licence fee. I am a supporter of the licence fee. I think that it is the only option at the moment that works and I cannot see a subscription model working, especially not for national and local radio and local television. Do you think the licence fee has a future? If you do not, what is the solution? What is the answer?

Lord Patten: No, I agree with you. The licence fee is a poll tax and I know something about poll taxes. What matters with a poll tax is acceptability of its level. I do not believe £159 a year for all the services provided by the BBC is an intolerable amount of money. I do not see any other alternative. I would hate the Government to be making a direct grant every year from general taxation. I think that would be a disaster. Any other form of hypothecated tax would also probably be a mistake. It is like democracy. I think that the licence fee has problems, but it is better than anything else.

Q494 Simon Jupp: You have mentioned funding problems in the past and funding problems now in the BBC. Do you want to see the licence fee going up, bearing in mind it is quite a large amount of money if you are struggling to make ends meet?

Lord Patten: Yes, but there are a lot of other things that make it difficult for people to make ends meet at the moment. I do not think that a reasonably moderate but acceptable for programming increase to the licence fee would make very much difference to the argument, which is, alas, one that exists in this country about whether people can heat or eat. I never thought I would live to see that happening.

Chair: Clive, do you have any questions?

Clive Efford: No, I think all the full answers that we have had have more than covered the subjects.

Q495 Chair: We have ranged very widely about the present and future of the BBC, Lord Patten. Do you think that something recognisable as today's



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BBC will still be with us in 20 years' time?

Lord Patten: I hope so, because I think that there will be a less robust democracy if that is not the case. We will have lost the extent to which the BBC plays a role today, not dissimilar from the role that public libraries used to play in public education.

As far as I am concerned, one of the best stories about British citizens and the British public today is that every Thursday morning at just after 9, 2 million people turn on Radio 4 to listen to Melvyn Bragg talking about quantum mechanics or the fourth crusade or whatever. I think that says wonderful things about this country and it would be a tragedy if that was not still happening.

Speaking as the chancellor of a university, one of the things we are keen to do ourselves is to play a bigger role in lifelong learning, not least because—I hope it applies to everybody in this Committee—demographically we are all likely to be living longer. I hope that the BBC will live longer as well and be doing so in a way that is properly resourced.

Chair: Thank you very much. On that note, we will finish.