



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: Pre-appointment hearing for Chair of the BBC, HC 383

Wednesday 13 December 2023

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Members present: Dame Caroline Dinenage (Chair); Kevin Brennan; Steve Brine; Clive Efford; Julie Elliott; Damian Green; Simon Jupp; John Nicolson.

Questions 1-131

Witness

I: Dr Samir Shah CBE, Government's candidate for chair of the BBC.

Written evidence from witness:

– [Add name of witness and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witness

Witness: Dr Shah.

Chair: Welcome to this meeting of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Today's meeting is a pre-appointment hearing with Dr Samir Shah, the Government's preferred candidate for chair of the BBC. Dr Shah, you are very welcome.

Before we start, I require all members to declare any relevant interests.

Clive Efford: I don't have any.

Damian Green: I have accepted hospitality from the BBC in the past. Indeed, even further back, I was an employee of the BBC.

Julie Elliott: I have accepted hospitality from the BBC in the past.

Simon Jupp: I have accepted BBC hospitality and am a former BBC journalist and manager.

Steve Brine: I saw "Strictly" last season. Tony Adams got withdrawn, so it was a great day.

John Nicolson: I tweeted incessantly about "Strictly" until my friend Krishnan got knocked out, and then I went in the huff. I am a former BBC employee, on "Newsnight" and presenting "BBC Breakfast", and I have accepted BBC hospitality. Crucially, I should say that Dr Samir Shah interviewed me for my first job on the network, along with David Aaronovitch, the well-known communist. I think the two of them and a third person interviewed me for my first job, which I got.

Chair: I have also accepted hospitality from the BBC. In fact, I went to see "Strictly" a couple of weeks ago, and realised how uncomfortable it is to sit in sequins for a very long period. It is not something that I will repeat. You are very welcome, Dr Shah.

Dr Shah: Thank you.

Q1 **Chair:** I will start the questions. Richard Sharp described the BBC's chair as a target. This is not an easy job. What made you decide to apply for it?

Dr Shah: It is really about the BBC, rather than about me. I have a great passion for the BBC. I have been involved with it for a long time—30 years or so—both on the inside and the outside. I think that the BBC is one of the country's great assets and it faces many challenges over the next few years. If I can bring any skills and experience that I have to help meet those challenges, that is what I would like to do.

Q2 **Chair:** What do you think makes you the most suitable person for this role?

Dr Shah: There are probably many suitable persons for this role, but I would characterise the experience that I can bring to bear in three



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different categories. The first is commercial: I have run my own production company for more than 20 years now. I have a very clear and good sense of value for money.

I remember that when I left the BBC to do that, my then boss was Tony Hall. About six months in, he said to me, "What's it like being out of the BBC and running your own business?" I said to Tony, "I spent most of my time at the BBC wondering how to spend the money you gave me wisely and properly. I spend all my time running Juniper and on how to earn money." I am very conscious of earning money and making sure that money is well spent. I think that one of the fundamental things to ask of the chair is to act in the public interest to make sure that the BBC spends the money it has wisely and carefully. I will bring that commercial culture.

The second area is public life. I have been involved in public life for a long time. I have been on the main board of the V&A, then deputy chair; I have been chair of a museum; and I have been on the board of the culture recovery fund. I understand the known principles—how to behave, to be honest and transparent—and I will bring those qualities to bear.

Finally, I am a creative, a programme maker. I know that is quite unusual for the chair, but it is useful to know the BBC as well as I do and to know it from the point of view of a programme maker, because at the end of the day that is what the BBC does.

Q3 Chair: This is a chair role virtually unlike any other. By virtue of taking the role, you come into the spotlight yourself—the subject of the news, as well as someone who has an overarching responsibility for what happens in the news. This will be the start of intense scrutiny of you, everything you do and everything you say. A lot of people would be daunted by that. Richard Sharp said that whoever is the chair is vulnerable. Do you feel vulnerable?

Dr Shah: No, I don't. I don't feel I am either a target or vulnerable. I think what I have is an obligation to carry out the duty of a chair—that is, to act in the public interest—and I feel that quite strongly.

As for being the recipient of scrutiny, I have had quite a bit of that. In the end, when I was running the BBC's political journalism I was very much in the eye of the storm, because we had to make sure that we were impartial—as I am sure we will come to. The heart of that is our political journalism, and I was part of that. In various other jobs, such as at the museums, there was quite a lot of controversy. I am kind of used to it, and I don't feel overwhelmed by it. It will be a tough job, but it should be.

Q4 Chair: Your eyes are open to the level of scrutiny, in particular of you, your life and everything you say. Every time someone in the BBC misbehaves, people will be calling for your resignation, even if it is about misbehaviour that happened well outside the jurisdiction of the BBC. You are ready to take on board that sort of challenge.



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Dr Shah: I am aware of it. Obviously, I have seen what happened with my predecessors and how the media and others cover the BBC. I am expecting that to take place, and I hope I have the ability to deal with it.

- Q5 **Chair:** In your questionnaire you said, “Every now and then, the BBC runs into a storm of criticism.” Just this weekend, you had an early taste of what that might look like, when Gary Lineker signed a letter criticising the Government’s refugee policy. We are going to talk a lot more about impartiality and social media when my colleagues speak to you later, but do you think that Gary Lineker has broken the BBC’s new social media guidelines or not?

Dr Shah: Let me say that I don’t think that was very helpful for Gary Lineker, the BBC or indeed the cause he supports, because what happens, as we have seen, is that it becomes a story of the BBC and Gary Lineker—another turn of that particular wheel. So I don’t think it is terribly helpful.

The context here is that John Hardie created a new set of social media rules to govern the social media behaviour of non-news presenters. I will just clear up a slight misunderstanding. In terms of the John Hardie rules, remember that the BBC has to balance freedom of expression and the right to have an opinion. People have the right to say what they feel and believe, especially about things they do not agree with. The point about freedom of expression is that you should be allowed to do that.

Social media has in some ways loosened this. For news presenters it is very clear: they cannot. Non-news presenters are free to express their opinions, but there is some guidance to do with the manner and the civility and not making ad hominem attacks. As far as I am aware, the signing of the letter did not breach those guidelines.

I do think, however, that the more recent tweet in which Mr Lineker identified politicians does, on the face of it, seem to breach those particular guidelines. I am not sure how egregious it is, but it does, and I would imagine that the BBC is now looking into that and considering its response.

- Q6 **Chair:** As chair, what would be your advice to the BBC on how it moves forward with that?

Dr Shah: As chair, I think it is our duty to monitor and see how well guidelines are delivering their purpose. What I would invite the director-general to do, having gone through this particular incident, is to say what his view is about whether or not the social media guidelines as they currently stand are delivering what they intended to. I would interrogate that quite forcibly, because I think we need to find a solution to this.

It doesn’t help anyone, and it damages the reputation of the BBC, if the BBC is constantly going around this—not just with this particular presenter, but generally. The BBC’s reputation matters, and this isn’t helpful. We need to find a solution to it. Were I to be chair, I would be keen to try to bring about such a solution.



Q7 Chair: I think we will come back to that line of questioning later, Dr Shah. Could I talk to you a bit about the scale of the BBC? It is a giant organisation, and as you yourself pointed out in your questionnaire, it is quite a disparate organisation, with 21,000 people all in all. The current business you have been running employs 14 people. How does your previous experience prepare you for a role of this magnitude?

Dr Shah: That is a very fair question, and it is one I wrestled with quite a bit when considering applying. I have been involved in large organisations of my own, and I have been involved in managing, most obviously at the Victoria & Albert, when I was deputy chair, though that is still not on the same scale as the BBC.

One of the interesting things I would say about the BBC is that although it is a large corporate entity, it does not function like one, because it is broken up. It is quite federated. There are smaller groups all over the country. There is a different kind of governance issue. It is about how to manage the independence and autonomy of these different groups and the centralised function. I did a bit of that when I was at the V&A, where we had operations outside of London, so I am conscious of it, but I wouldn't say that I have huge experience of that. In mitigation, I do know the BBC pretty well from the inside, so I do not need to learn about the BBC in those terms.

Q8 Chair: There is something strong for me about somebody who is already aware of where their potential areas of weakness are and is able to identify them; I would much rather have someone sit here in front of us and go, "Look, I appreciate that this is an area I need to work on," rather than someone who says, "I've got this. Everything's going to be absolutely fine." We have had that in the past, and it does not always work out quite as anticipated.

In previous roles, you have never had to deal with any finances on the scale of the BBC's. The finances are precarious, right? What is the plan for that? Have you had any experience of something on that level?

Dr Shah: Not at that level, no. But what I do have is a very clear sense of financial management. I understand a balance sheet and I understand a P and L; I understand the difficulties. I have looked at the figures. You are right that they are bigger numbers, but some of the principles are the same, so I hope that I would be able to rise to that challenge.

Q9 Chair: What will be the biggest obstacles you will face in rising to that challenge?

Dr Shah: What I would need to do is ensure that I fully understand the depth and scale of what is going on. You are right that the organisation is very fragmented. It is quite disparate all over the country. That would be a big obstacle. As I said, I would need to spend quite a bit of time at the beginning getting around about the place and understanding how the BBC and its different sections operate. I hope I have the intellectual wherewithal to get to grips with it.

Q10 Chair: The other thing on my mind is the transformation. The BBC is in a



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near-constant state of transformation, and that is only ever going to increase as we move forward. The challenges of the modern world are ones that the BBC needs to adjust and respond to. That will require some major organisational change from not only a financial but an organisational perspective. What experience do you have of leading that kind of work?

Dr Shah: The transformational change that the BBC currently has to undergo is a massive change in the way audiences consume programming, whether it is written, sound or vision. That is going from linear to digital. That is inevitable, and it is a very big challenge for the BBC: not simply going in that direction, but also making sure we keep both sides—there are a whole load of people not going in that direction—so that, as we move down the digital transformation, we do not lose that quite significant group of licence fee payers who continue to use the analogue version of the BBC. That is a major challenge.

That is a specific transformation—I have other examples from the museum world where we have changed the way we define what the museum's purpose is and changed the purpose of the museum: different kinds of transformations, but not linear to digital.

Q11 **Chair:** Some of the digital changes we have seen over the last year or two have in some ways gone against the BBC's stated objective. Some of the changes to regional broadcasting, for example, have favoured digital over the service provided to its long-standing, maybe slightly older or more vulnerable demographic of consumers. What do you feel about that?

Dr Shah: That is a real issue. I am aware of the impact of the changes in place on local services. I have read the BBC's defence of that. It is a question of getting the balance and the speed of change right. We cannot gainsay the direction of travel. That is where the audience is going: it is going to digital and it is going online.

We need to be where the audience wants the BBC to be, but getting the pace and the balance right so that we do not leave people behind is an important thing. Were I to be chair, I would look very hard at what the consequences of implementing that have been on the ground on the way people have consumed, to see that we have got that balance correct.

Q12 **Chair:** At face value, does anything concern you about the culture of the BBC? Is there anything you think may need to change about the culture of the BBC?

Dr Shah: That is quite difficult, because I am not in the BBC and have not been in the BBC for over 20 years. The only thing I know is what I have read, and I don't think that is an adequate basis to think about the culture, were I to be chair.

Q13 **Chair:** But do you have the stomach for it? Once you get under the bonnet of the BBC, if you identify something that you feel needs changing, do you have the stomach to address something as fundamental



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as the culture of the BBC?

Dr Shah: Oh, yes. I would like to assure the Committee that I have the stomach to do that.

Q14 **Damian Green:** Good morning. You will know the unfortunate history of your predecessor. In the end, he stepped down because he failed to disclose a potential conflict of interest, not least to this Committee when we had the equivalent of this hearing.

So let's go through some of these. Have you discussed your candidacy with any members of the Government or special advisers?

Dr Shah: No, I have not.

Q15 **Damian Green:** You have literally not spoken to anyone in Government since you applied?

Dr Shah: No.

Q16 **Damian Green:** Okay. I see from your letter that Andrew Neil put you up to do it.

Dr Shah: Yes. He rang me and said that the closing date was coming, and he felt quite strongly that I should go for it.

Q17 **Damian Green:** But nobody inside the Government machine has spoken to you?

Dr Shah: No, I have not had any approaches.

Q18 **Damian Green:** And have you discussed it with any members of the current BBC board?

Dr Shah: I have discussed my application with many people, including members of the current board, previous members of the board, and people inside and outside the BBC at the highest levels and at programming level. In preparing both for applying and the selection panel, I did talk to a lot of people, including members of the board. The thing is that I know quite a few people. I have been in the business for quite a long time, and I know many people.

Q19 **Damian Green:** Did any of them tell you that you are mad to do this?

Dr Shah: Most of them told me I am mad and asked whether I really know what I am doing, partly because of the controversy surrounding my predecessor, and because it is a tough job. The BBC is forever in people's line of sight, and it needs to behave properly. I do care for the BBC. I think it provides a service of huge public value, and if I can help it do that I am keen to do so.

Q20 **Damian Green:** Your declarations note no political activity based on the terms of the governance code. Is there any other lesser political or campaigning activity that we should be aware of?

Dr Shah: No. I have been a journalist all my life, and I have never been involved in any political activity at all. I went through it: I have not been a



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campaigner, I have not been a member of a party, I have not given any donations—nothing.

- Q21 **Damian Green:** I suppose the other half of this question is financial dealings. Are there any financial dealings that you may as well disclose at this time that haven't been disclosed yet?

Dr Shah: Politically or generally?

Damian Green: Generally.

Dr Shah: There is one thing that I have in one of my notes, but I am not sure. On conflicts of interest, let me just say that as far as I am concerned, the important thing is that I am open, transparent and clear about what I believe those to be. I have listed them all in my note. There is one that DCMS and the BBC do not think is worth saying, but I do. I am part of a panel reviewing the Leicester unrest, led by Lord Austin, and I have been talking about whether I need to step away from that. On all my conflicts of interest, from my production company to my relationship with the controller of Radio 4, I have been engaged with conversations with DCMS and the BBC about what mitigations need to be put in place and what I need to do. I am very clear that I will do what it takes to remove that conflict of interest from my activities.

- Q22 **Damian Green:** So you will withdraw from any activity—

Dr Shah: Oh, completely. There is no question.

- Q23 **Damian Green:** Are there any other issues that you think, after filling in those forms and sending your CV round, perhaps the world should know about this now, rather than find out about it in six months' time?

Dr Shah: It is a good question, and I have thought about that. I have been thinking, "What is it that the Committee may be interested in and may feel that you should have told them about?" The thing I am doing in Leicester is one that wasn't formally put in. I honestly cannot think of anything else. Certainly, nothing financial. I was thinking about anything editorial, but I don't take any sides there. I cannot think of anything. I notice that when my preferred candidacy was announced, the newspapers identified a few things that I had written about, and perhaps the Committee will ask me about them, but that is all they managed to dig up.

- Q24 **Damian Green:** As you know, this is a formal session—this is the official pre-hearing session. If the Committee recommends that you are not suitable for the job, what will you do?

Dr Shah: Well, it would be disappointing. I would look at the reasons the Committee has come to that decision, reflect on those, discuss it and think, well, maybe, you are right. I would have to look at what the reasons were.

- Q25 **Damian Green:** So you would not take a position now, in absolute terms, that "If they do not want me, I will not take the job."



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Dr Shah: I would like to know the reasons were. If I knew the reasons, I might take it, but if you were to articulate or hypothesise some of the reasons, I might be able to make a judgment on that.

Q26 **Damian Green:** If I can move on to the BBC. Obviously, the BBC is our most prominent public service broadcaster, but there are others. Do you think, in the different media landscape that we all live in now, that there is a long-term future for public service broadcasting?

Dr Shah: I absolutely hope so and believe so. I think public service broadcasting has an immensely important role to play in public life; even more so than when the media landscape was more stable. There are many factors there. Most important, of course, is the delivery of impartial, factual news. The media landscape has delivered loads of good things. There is some tremendous drama and tremendous programming coming out of the streamers, but when it comes to news, and the BBC and public service broadcasters—I include others—it is so important that the BBC delivers news and informs. It is important for our democracy; it really is.

The need for public service broadcasting has increased rather than decreased, although paradoxically, because of the scale of how much is now available, it seems to me the BBC is even more important. It is not just news; we can talk about the other areas as well where the BBC can play an important role.

Q27 **Damian Green:** What is your view about the Media Bill? Do you think it is forward-looking enough to try to future-proof the regulatory regime from what will continue to be a rapidly changing environment?

Dr Shah: I think it does a good job. It is a rapidly changing environment and I think we should constantly keep it under review. As technology is changing so quickly, it is quite difficult to future-proof it completely. It is difficult to guess the future here. Even if you were to take the situation 10 years ago, you would not have predicted where we are now. The changing patterns of consumption are just extraordinary.

Q28 **Damian Green:** I agree with that point. It is just a fact that the Bill is effectively replacing a Bill that is 20 years old, which was an impossibly different world. It is conceivable that Parliament will not get round to passing all-encompassing primary legislation again for another 20 years, at which point God alone knows how we will all be absorbing news, entertainment or whatever. That is the test for the Media Bill. Do you think it does what it can?

Dr Shah: I suppose I will not be able to answer that question as cleanly as you would wish me to. My point of view is that the important thing for the BBC, if I were to be the chair, is the charter review and to make sure that the charter review settlement is one that keeps the BBC surviving and doing the best it can. That would be where my focus would be. If you were to say, specifically, which bits of the Media Bill you think I could talk about—

Q29 **Damian Green:** No, I think that is far enough. I want other colleagues to



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come in, but also to follow up on one thing from the Chair and what appears to be the eternal BBC problem with Gary Lineker. He provoked a crisis. That crisis provoked a whole new set of guidelines with an outsider coming in to set those guidelines. At the first opportunity, he, according to you, has broken those guidelines.

Dr Shah: Not quite the first opportunity; the third opportunity. The initial two posts were considered, as far as I am aware and I understand, for the BBC, they did not breach that. I think this last one—the one that specifically identified two politicians—seems to me, on the face of it, to be a breach of those guidelines. I imagine the BBC is looking into that now.

Q30 **Damian Green:** It just feels completely extraordinary that both this Committee and public discourse generally are spending so much time worrying about the political views of a sports presenter. It is faintly absurd. Do you not think that the root of it is that Gary Lineker has no regard for the BBC at all? It is the institution that has made him a successful broadcaster and he is putting two fingers up to any guidelines that the BBC proposes introducing.

Dr Shah: I understand the point that you are making. First, if I were to be chair, I would think in terms of whether we have the balance right between freedom of expression—the BBC is in favour of freedom of expression, as it should be—and also the duty to be impartial. It is very clear when it comes to news and current affairs and when it is not. There is this grey area, within which Mr Lineker sits, and I share your frustration. I would certainly invite the director-general and his team to find a solution to this, because we really need to.

Q31 **Chair:** You were talking about a grey area, but the BBC itself has identified these 12 flagship programmes where the presenters have to pay special attention to how they behave in the social media world. The BBC has already laid out quite interesting guidelines that need to be followed. Do you have confidence that they will be?

Dr Shah: Were I to be chair, I think it is a perfectly proper thing for the board to ask the executive whether these new guidelines have achieved the intention for which they were written, and to scrutinise fairly carefully and rigorously the answer to that question. It may well be that they need to review it again. From the board's point of view, the BBC faced an issue about this, they have come up with social media, and they have spent some time discussing it. Now, it is right and proper, given that—as Damian Green has said, it seems to be tested once again, and I would be keen to hear whether the media, as they are currently drawn up, are standing up to that test or whether they need to be examined again.

Q32 **Steve Brine:** Thanks for coming, Dr Shah—it is nice to see you. I was not going to pick up on this, but you have said the exact same words twice—"I would imagine the BBC is looking into it now." Do you know whether the BBC is looking into it now, or are you just imagining?

Dr Shah: Well, I am imagining. I have not been formally told.

Q33 **Steve Brine:** Have you had any conversations with anyone on the board



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about this?

Dr Shah: No, not on the board. I have, in preparation for this, been discussing these issues with DCMS and the BBC. The BBC has been careful, I have to say, to be guarded about what exactly it is doing. I think that is fair enough—I do not have a locus here.

Q34 **Steve Brine:** What do you think should happen? This is about you, isn't it? It is about your character, who you are and what you think. What do you think actually should happen? The last time that Gary Lineker and the director-general went head-to-head, the director-general folded more quickly than a deck chair on Brighton beach. There was a complete and utter mutiny, "Match of the Day" was cancelled, and commentators hung up their microphones. In reality, is it not Gary Lineker 1, director-general 0?

Dr Shah: I can absolutely understand that. What do I think should happen? I think that, on the face of it, the most recent tweets seem to be in breach of those guidelines. I think the director-general and the BBC, who are overseeing this, should determine whether that is the case. If they say that it is the case, as I suspect that they may do, then they need to think about what is a condign action to take.

Q35 **Steve Brine:** While keeping football coverage on the air?

Dr Shah: While keeping football coverage on the air.

Q36 **Steve Brine:** We seem to have a football martyr—anyway, fascinating as that is.

In your BBC past you have been head of television current affairs and head of political programmes—news and current affairs across both TV and radio. It is a very news and current affairs background, which is great and that is obviously one of the things that the BBC is known for, and I want to come on to that in just a second. From your experience, what would your priorities be for your first 100 days—as we say in politics? The director-general, speaking to us in June, said, "We need an individual of extremely high competence. We have a complex set of issues...everything from Eurovision to local radio to commercial. You need someone who can grasp the breadth and depth of the BBC." I am wondering how wide your vision is, given your news and current affairs background?

Dr Shah: The first thing I would say is that while you characterise me on what I did at the BBC, for the last 24-odd years I have been outside the BBC, and my range of programming is much wider than that. I have done many history programmes, multicultural programmes, and indeed dramas as well. I made a drama—admittedly on politics—for BBC Two on the fight between Theresa May and Boris Johnson for the leadership of the Conservative party. I persuaded the BBC to let me write the screenplay for that, so I have got a broader sense of being a programme maker. I wrote that, and it was great fun.

Steve Brine: It wasn't to live through it, but carry on.



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Dr Shah: I have a broad range. Sorry, can you remind me of your question?

Q37 **Steve Brine:** My question was about the vision that you have beyond news and current affairs, bearing in mind what the DG rightly said about the huge span.

Dr Shah: The first 100 days—okay. As you might imagine, there are a lot of things. I think this is rather predictable of me, but of course, it is an election year next year. That is a very, very important thing for the BBC. The public turn to the BBC during elections. It is one of our big numbers, so we need to be match fit for it. Indeed, in my last role at the BBC, the election coverage came out of my department. I was closely involved in the coverage of the '97 election—I was actually in charge of it. I do know about election coverage, so I hope I can bring that. There are a number of other issues that I think are bubbling under. There are some HR questions: Tim Westwood and Huw Edwards. Those will be right up there.

Q38 **Steve Brine:** Do you think Huw was treated unfairly?

Dr Shah: I don't know enough about the detail of it. All I know is what I have read, and I don't think that is adequate for me to make any judgment.

Q39 **Steve Brine:** Let's go on to news and current affairs then, and look at Gaza and Israel. Is the BBC having a good war?

Dr Shah: That is a good question. The first thing I would like to say is that the BBC journalists out there are working in very dangerous and difficult circumstances. That is not just the people on screen, but the cameramen, the crews, and the whole logistical effort. They are working in really difficult places, and they have to file a lot of output. I think we need to be cautious, sitting here in the safety of Britain, saying whether they are having a good war or not.

Q40 **Steve Brine:** I don't think anyone is doubting their dedication or that they are putting their lives at risk.

Dr Shah: There is no question that there have clearly been some mistakes. The BBC has acknowledged those. It is one of those stories where, again, it sounds like cliché, but actually it seems to me that emotions are very high and people are taking very strong views on either side. That puts the BBC in a difficult position to get that right and to be impartial. It seems to me that there is enough criticism of the BBC and the way it has covered this war, for me—if I were to be chair—to review it, and to look at our editorial guidance. You did not mention this, but I may as well mention it—

Steve Brine: I am about to.

Dr Shah: Everyone has been worried about the word "terrorism". I think we need to look again at that. As it happens, I have found that in the spring, the BBC does a periodic view of its editorial guidelines. It seems to



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me that the issues the current war has thrown up absolutely need to be at the heart of that, to be open-minded about how the BBC has done.

I do not think it is an adequate response to say, "Well, both sides criticise us and therefore we are doing alright." Both sides should not criticise us—then we would be doing alright. The former is not a good explanation. It is alright as a sound bite, but really the ambition for BBC journalists should be that neither side criticises us, and that they think we are doing well. Some organisations do that, and we need to aspire to that.

- Q41 **Steve Brine:** You mentioned Hamas. The BBC is in this situation, which lots of people have called out, including senior Government Ministers. It is in a situation where it has a line on Hamas, which the UK Government and many others have declared a terrorist organisation, as if that is some kind of opinion from the UK Government, as opposed to a fact. John Simpson said, "Calling someone a terrorist means you're taking sides". You said in your pre-appointment hearing questionnaire to review our coverage of Israel-Gaza, and you have just repeated that here. How do you reflect on that particular situation?

Dr Shah: I think we should take that on board. We need to consider what John and other people have said, and that particular line that reporters have used, very clearly. That has been a response to the current way in which it is being covered, but it seems to me that the guidelines, which we discussed in spring, need to take a slightly more detached look at it and say, "Where did we get it right? Where did we get it wrong? How can we improve it?" Was that the best formula, because as a listener and a watcher it felt a bit clunky? It did not feel natural, as Mr Nicolson will know; it is not the natural speech of a reporter.

- Q42 **Steve Brine:** It's not. So you are committing to be part of that review if you take up the post.

Dr Shah: I am absolutely committing to get the proprieties right. As the chair, I will ask the BBC to review that. I think they are doing it anyway, but this should be part of it.

- Q43 **Steve Brine:** Okay. But obviously the justification is to say, "Calling them a terrorist organisation would be an opinion; it would be taking sides." We will move on to a general election year, which you also pre-mentioned. This was a good strategy, if I may say so. You said in your questionnaire that you need to be match-fit, and you have said it here. How will you do that? How will you get match-fit? It will be an incredibly contested election.

Dr Shah: It will be a very contested election.

Steve Brine: I suspect it will be one of the most negative in our history.

Dr Shah: There are a lot of practical things that the BBC needs to do in terms of allocation of time to different parties and ensuring that we get that right. There will then be the whole issue of televised debates and a whole load of things happening. I will invite Tim and Deborah Turness to present the plan and say, "What is your plan?" I am not the editor-in-



chief; I do not run it. However, I know enough about that to be able to interrogate the plan that they come up with and give it proper scrutiny.

- Q44 **Steve Brine:** Would you be challenging them on language? This morning, BBC News reporters on the “Today” programme said, “Rishi Sunak has seen off a rebellion from right-wing Tory MPs on his flagship Rwanda Bill.” You cannot call something a terrorist organisation, because that is an opinion; I do not agree with the side of my party that rebelled last night, but calling them “right-wing” is an opinion, isn’t it? Why is that opinion okay on the headlines of the “Today” programme, yet it is not okay to call Hamas a terrorist organisation?

Dr Shah: I think language is actually central to all this, not just about “right-wing” but everywhere. As I have said before, I have been doing this review for the BBC on migrants and small boats. We have illegal migrants; we have refugees; we have asylum seekers; and we have unauthorised crossings. Every one of those words is freighted with meaning. I think we need to be careful—the BBC need to be careful—in how they use them, and I think that is true of the way in which politics is covered. I actually looked up where the right wing and left wing thing came from, and it came about back in the French revolution years. We need to think about the words that we use, because people are much more knowledgeable and understand that any single word will be freighted with all sorts of connotations. We need to be clear about and aware of that, and it should be part of the way that we analyse whether we are being impartial enough. Are we being properly impartial in using words? We did some focus group research for this study, and it is fascinating to hear the audience respond to certain words in this particular area. It will absolutely be part of the review.

Steve Brine: It sounds like you will be stress-testing the plan and the language, which is the role of the chair. Others want to come in, but thank you for your responses.

- Q45 **Julie Elliott:** I am very involved in middle east stuff in this place, and although I have some criticisms of your coverage I think the specialist journalists—such as Yolande, who is in Jerusalem—have been very good. Once the specialists got involved, things improved dramatically; I just wanted to say that. I will move on to something completely different and then come back to something that Steve mentioned. How would you judge the BBC’s reputation, both here and abroad, at the minute? How would you judge it in comparison with when you worked for the BBC?

Dr Shah: Shall we begin with abroad, because—

Julie Elliott: However you want to answer the question is fine.

Dr Shah: Obviously, there is one bit of abroad I know very well indeed—my own country, India. The BBC’s reputation abroad is fabulous. It’s a long-standing—the BBC is a great, great instrument for public service. Its World Service and what it does has a tremendous—you would only have to be in India. I will just say this as a personal thing. When my name came forward as the preferred candidate, all my family in India were full of



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congratulations, which they would be, but also because it was the BBC. The BBC matters; it counts. So I think, in terms of abroad, it is important.

Domestically, it has changed, and not surprisingly—

Q46 **Julie Elliott:** For the better? For the worse?

Dr Shah: There has been greater competition, and that in a way is good, in the sense that you can challenge what the BBC does. Take, for example, a relatively non-contentious area: sport—Mr Lineker notwithstanding. The streamers and Sky have done terrific sports coverage and therefore the BBC's reputation on that is not as great as it was when the BBC was the only game in town. There are now others. So in different areas, the BBC has different reputations. In the areas where the streamers have focused, which are, in a word, the more "commercial" ones—dramas, sport—let's face it; the streamers have done excellent programming. There are many programmes that I think the BBC would be proud to show. Most recently—I don't know whether you have seen it—Apple TV have created a series called "Slow Horses", from Mick Herron's book. It is an absolutely stunning drama, and anybody at the BBC would love to have done it. And we all know "Succession". These are great things. So I think the BBC's reputation is now challenged by the streamers in certain areas. I think the BBC, when it comes to the area that I am interested in, that I am involved in—trust—the figures suggest it has gone down, and that is not good. I have the statistics there. We need to get that right.

I think there is a challenge to the BBC's journalism and there is the trust factor. Some of that has to do with what we were talking about earlier. We just need to strengthen our commitment and delivery of impartial journalism. I think we can do it. At the moment, I think, 50% of the British public think we are impartial, but that means that 50% don't. We need to bridge that gap.

Q47 **Julie Elliott:** So the surveys say it has gone down, but do you think it has gone down?

Dr Shah: You mean on news?

Julie Elliott: News or the BBC in general, or both.

Dr Shah: Well, I think you would have to separate it out. I wouldn't say it has gone down. The competition is greater. What has happened is that the kind of talent, the cost of talent, great writers—the BBC is now clearly finding great writers and they are then picked up by others. I'm thinking of Jed Mercurio, Peter Morgan or, famously, Phoebe Waller-Bridge. These people are great; the BBC has found them, and they go off. They do make great things, because they're great. But the BBC has been the finder, the innovator, of these things. So I think you have to change what you judge the BBC by. If you change that and you do it in terms of what they are now realistically able to do, I think they do a good job. You can always do better, but I think they do a good job.



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Q48 **Julie Elliott:** But that's not about their reputation, is it? That is your opinion of whether they do a good job.

Dr Shah: Reputation, though, is a different thing. It's not always—you have people outside the BBC who wish to campaign against it and sully it. There is only so much one can do about that.

Q49 **Julie Elliott:** Let's move on. I have been on this Committee, in various iterations, longer than anyone else, so I have done a lot of hearings concerning the BBC over the years, and there are two areas I want to focus on. My experience of BBC employees is that morale is absolutely as low as it can possibly be, both nationally and regionally. In the regions, we have had the cutting of in-depth investigative journalism programmes, the absolute debacle of "Inside Out", an award-winning show, being cancelled and the replacement then being cancelled because it was a joke and didn't employ investigative journalists. We have had 95% of regional political programmes recorded on a Friday teatime—they can look like a history programme by Sunday morning—and the decimation of local radio, and so it goes on.

Morale in the regions is dreadful. I think that not only is staff morale dreadful, but the people's view of the BBC in the regions is hanging on by a thread. What is your view of those, I think, mistakes? How do you see that going forward?

Dr Shah: As you probably know, I am very involved in that. To your political programme point, I make two of those that are recorded on a Friday afternoon and shown on a Sunday. I would not quite say they were history programmes, but I understand—

Julie Elliott: They are sometimes.

Dr Shah: When they were on Sunday, quite a lot of politicians were saying, "We don't want to come on Sunday. We're in London, so might we do it on Friday afternoons?"—

Q50 **Julie Elliott:** Let me stop you there. Most north-east politicians are in the north-east on a weekend. Most north-east politicians have one working day on a Friday that they're in the constituency. It takes out a third of your day when you do it. A Sunday morning is a very easy thing to do.

Dr Shah: I don't do the north-east. My own personal experience is London and the south-east. I think it should be said—well, let me just pull back a bit.

We know that the income of the BBC has dropped by 30% in the last 10 years. The BBC has had to make some very tough decisions to try and balance the books. Every tough decision has a price and a consequence, and I think, were I to be chair, I would say, "Well, you've made this tough decision"—and I think some of you might well agree—"and there's been a price to be paid for that. What is your assessment of that price? Is it what you expected, or was it too much, or do you want to change that?" I think the chair has to think strategically about the genuine problem, which is



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how do you run the BBC when you've got a 30% drop in income? That's a huge drop.

I used to make films for "Inside Out", so I am fully aware of what happened to "Inside Out" and the fact that we cannot make those films any more. I was personally affected by this, but the argument, you see, was actually quite compelling. "Inside Out" is not a very costly programme for a half-hour show. It is about, I think, £25,000 an episode, which is pretty damn good. But you have to multiply that by nine because there are nine regions, and that's £180,000.

Kevin Brennan: £225,000.

Dr Shah: Well, yes. Now that was nine programmes, all costing £25,000, so it becomes quite costly. The first attempt was to syndicate sections and share some of the output, so that it became less costly. It is a hard thing.

Investigations were another area. I don't know the details because I was on the outside, and I was kind of saying, "Oh, why are you doing this? It's not right. It's affecting my business." But, you know, it is hard. These decisions are tough. Even in the local services—the BBC do say they have provided journalists and do stuff for local services—people locally are moving online, so there is movement there. I am told that the actual quantum of money has not changed; it is where it is going that has changed, and it is going into digital things. I do not know enough, because I am not there, to know the actual detail of the evidence and the choices—

Q51 **Julie Elliott:** Will you commit to having a look at that? I think it has been an absolute disaster, as somebody who lives 300 miles from London.

Dr Shah: Absolutely. Honestly, that is an open door. I have worked in regional television. I have made regional programmes for a long time. It matters, in my view. It is one of the distinctive things the BBC does because the streamers don't do local programmes, but the BBC does. It is an important part of the public service that the BBC does.

Julie Elliott: I think it is a crucial part.

Dr Shah: It is very important, not just in the regions but in the nations as well. It is really important, and I absolutely will look at the money that is going in there, whether it is achieving what they want, should they be recalibrating it—but all within the context of the very tough financial world we live in.

Q52 **Julie Elliott:** But I would suggest £225,000 is not an enormous amount in the BBC's budget.

Dr Shah: For a half-hour programme, it is quite a lot.

Q53 **Julie Elliott:** Moving on to some of the national things we have covered, we had the absolute debacle of the equal pay situation, which was, I think, one of the BBC's darkest days, speaking as a woman. It was unbelievable. We had the closure of the news channel in April last year, to be replaced by something that is not news, although we were told it



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was going to be news. It is not. I flick it on quite frequently, and there is no news there. There are still ongoing issues with the fallout of staff who worked on that news channel, particularly women. That is still ongoing, and we are now in December. In terms of the treatment of women staff nationally, particularly news broadcasters, I think the BBC still has a long way to go. I would hope you look at that. We have recently had the announcement of the changing of the news and the cutting of "Newsnight" to a half-hour debating programme. So it goes on—the loss of very experienced staff in news and current affairs in the BBC. Morale in that area nationally is dire at the moment and is getting worse. As you have said, we are in an election year. You said that "getting the balance right and the price of change right has to be at the core of this". How do you think that is going to happen with this absolute mess of news coverage going on?

Dr Shah: I probably would not use the word "mess". The first thing I would say is that I don't know enough of the specific detail. I only know what I have read. Were I to be chair, I would certainly invite Deborah and others to give me the detail on this. Whether it is "Newsnight" or the news channel we are still working with, it really is important. It is a 30% cut in the last 10 years. We have to do something. For "Newsnight", there are other factors—and regions. Whether it is network or local, I would want to get on top of it, inevitably. It is my interest. I want to know what they are doing.

Q54 **Julie Elliott:** As things stand, running into an election year—not just a UK election, but a USA election, which impacts everybody—if the BBC don't do something dramatic soon, then the coverage will not be what we expect from the BBC, to be polite about it. What do you think can change and needs to change quickly? As a consumer and somebody looking at it, you can see what has been going on.

Dr Shah: I have to repeat this: I don't really know the detail of this, because I am not in the BBC—

Julie Elliott: No, but I am asking you—

Dr Shah: Sorry, I am going to make a point. What I did know when I was at the BBC and I ran the election was that the BBC had a general election budget to make sure we did the general election well. I don't know the answer, so I am presuming, but I will find out whether there is such a thing, because there is nothing more important than the BBC covering the general election well and properly, with the proper resources. I will interrogate that to make sure it has them.

Q55 **Julie Elliott:** On the staff morale point, as I say, everywhere it is desperate.

Dr Shah: Staff morale is a difficult issue. It is not just about their pay. It is about how valued they and what they do are. I will try—we may come to this—to be slightly more visible and value the staff. I think the staff work really hard. One of the interesting things about these morale questions is that the staff might have low morale periodically over the



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year, but it does not stop their commitment to doing the best they can in the department or programme they are working on. They really give their all. To take "Inside Out", I have worked with that team, and they don't get paid very much, but my God—do they help and work and make sure they do the best they can.

Q56 **Julie Elliott:** Finally, I mentioned a number of things that have particularly affected women in the BBC. What is your focus going to be on that? Mistakes are still being made.

Dr Shah: There is the equal pay question and the gender gap. Those are the two different aspects of this issue. I think on equal pay, that was not the BBC's best hour, as we said. Let's see if that has now been dealt with. I will look into that. The gender pay gap, as I understand it, is getting better. It is narrowing, but it needs to get to nought. We need to make sure that we take the actions and policies to get there. It cannot be that the BBC has any discriminatory attitude to its male or female staff. It is 2023, you know?

Q57 **Chair:** What is the gender pay gap at the moment?

Dr Shah: I have two figures in my mind: 11% and 5%. I am not sure whether the gender pay gap has now gone to 5%, but someone will know the specific detail. I can come back to you on that.

Q58 **Clive Efford:** Thank you for coming to speak to us today. You mentioned earlier that you were set off on this journey by a phone call from Andrew Neil, which struck me. It wasn't 1 April, was it?

Dr Shah: No.

Clive Efford: But you are still speaking to him. What reasons did he give for believing that it was the right thing for you to do?

Dr Shah: Andrew and I go back a long way. I brought him over from New York to work at the BBC. I was closely involved, because I made a programme called "This Week" with Andrew Neil, Michael Portillo and various others. As a result, I got to know Andrew very well and he got to know me. It was a weekly show, so we got to know each other very well.

I suppose Andrew believes that impartiality is a very big part of the BBC's mission. It is what the director-general has made his central thing and it is also, as it were, my "what I do"—you might be aware that the Royal Television Society gave me an outstanding contribution to journalism award because of my contribution to impartiality. I think his feeling was that it would be good to strengthen the board and to provide support for the executive with someone who understands impartiality, is committed to it and will help the BBC to improve its delivery of that.

Q59 **Clive Efford:** It is just because of that? Did you discuss at all the future funding of the BBC? He has strong views on that.

Dr Shah: No, we did not.

Q60 **Clive Efford:** Okay. Back in 2008, when you were a member of the



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board, you wrote an essay in which you described the BBC as having a “monolithic posture”. What are your views on that now?

Dr Shah: I looked up that article and read it. I have to say that it was quite prescient, because what I was saying—I was looking at it from the point of view of production—was that if you are a producer and you have a great idea, but you send it to the BBC and they say “No, end of story,” you just cannot go anywhere else. At that time, I thought “Well, the BBC has all the public service licence fee. There are other companies—Channel 4 and others—that also do public service. Maybe they should get a slice of it and give the BBC some competition for ideas.”

I thought that that was a bad idea, because you would make Channel 4 another department of the BBC and I think that Channel 4 has a different cultural context. The point that I was making was that the BBC needs to have internal competition. It needs to have different places for people to go to get commissioned. And that is what the BBC has done over the past 10 or 15 years: it has moved productions and programming outside, so now we have different places to go. Most importantly, of course, it has also created BBC Studios, which is a separate entity. As an independent producer, I can go for everything. I don’t have a quota. As they do, I can compete.

What I was trying to get at was that the BBC should be more open and more competitive, and it needed to find an internal way of organising such that it remains the BBC, but people have access to the BBC in different parts, so you can get things commissioned. I think it has done that.

Q61 **Clive Efford:** So you would say that your view that decisions were made by “a handful of people”, not reflecting the outside world, has changed as well.

Dr Shah: That is a good question. I will certainly be interrogating the executive on that in particular, because it seems to me—

Clive Efford: When you look at the board, is it reflective of the outside world?

Dr Shah: The board doesn’t make the editorial decisions; the executive does. I will answer your question, though, but let me say again that I am looking at it as a person outside. Were I to be chair, I would be interrogating this.

The BBC has done a really good job of moving programmes and production out of London into various places. There is another P, however, and that is power. In broadcasting, there are two currencies: airtime and money. The question I would ask is “How much of that power has moved?” We all remember the ITV structure—Granada, Yorkshire, Tyne Tees, all with network airtime and network money—so we had that really regional feel to it. I am interested to find out the extent to which power has also moved. That was the point that I was getting at. I don’t know the answer, but I am interested and continue to be interested in that.



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Q62 **Clive Efford:** If you get the job, we can look forward to quizzing you on what progress you have made on that.

Dr Shah: Yes.

Q63 **Clive Efford:** Can I take you back to Gary Lineker? I know that you were not involved directly, but it was well covered; we all know a great deal about what went on. Do you think the BBC handled it well?

Dr Shah: Which particular bit of the Gary Lineker story?

Clive Efford: All of it, really: how they responded to his initial public comments, and then how they handled the industrial relations and the human resources side of it, which led to "Match of the Day" being taken off the air.

Dr Shah: I would find it quite difficult to make a judgment on that, because I was not in the room when those discussions or conversations took place.

Q64 **Clive Efford:** Is there anything that you would have done differently?

Dr Shah: I don't know what they did to know whether I would have done it differently, if you see what I mean.

Let me be clear: were I to be the chair, it would be the job of the editor-in-chief and his team to deal with it. I would be looking at it and asking, "How well have they managed it? Has it affected the BBC's reputation? Could they do it better?" The actual exercise of it is for them.

But, honestly, I do not know the detail of it, and it would be unfair of me to say, "Well, they didn't do this, they didn't do that, they didn't say this." How do I know? I don't know.

Q65 **Clive Efford:** You are on the brink of being appointed the chair, and there is a current controversy with Gary Lineker, again, so you must have some thoughts about how you as chair would handle that. What would be your first act in relation to that situation, as the chair?

Dr Shah: I would talk to the director-general and ask him what he is doing about this last tweet, which in my view, as I said, appears to be in breach of the guidelines.

Q66 **Clive Efford:** What is in that tweet that you think is in breach of the guidelines? If a politician enters into public discourse with someone like Gary Lineker, they are fair game, aren't they?

Dr Shah: Let me be clear. The guidelines allow non-news presenters to express their view and say things, but they also say that you have to carry out that expression in a civil way and, in particular, not make ad hominem attacks in statements on politicians.

There is a place, of course, for the BBC to give politicians rigorous interviewing. That place is the news, and that is perfectly right and proper. That is a separate matter. It is right that they should be dealt with without

fear or favour and it should be rigorous. Social media is slightly different: the guidelines say that you must not do that. It appears that Mr Lineker has, so I think that that is something to be addressed.

- Q67 **Clive Efford:** But is there not a difference? If Gary Lineker came on "Match of the Day" and started attacking a politician, I would absolutely get that. But if he has made a comment about a public matter, which in this case was the Rwanda treaty, and he has signed a letter, which is his personal view, and then politicians start to weigh in on that, he is entitled to comment back, isn't he?

Dr Shah: Not according to social media guidelines. He is entitled to sign the letter, but you can be critical and say what you feel about it without making ad hominem remarks. That is what the guidelines seem to me currently to say.

As I said, we need to find a solution to this. It has been going on for too long, and it may be that the social guidelines once again need to be looked at and reviewed to make sure that we somehow get this out of the public eye. This repeating round becomes just a kind of psychodrama with the BBC and Mr Lineker. We just need to find a solution. I am not sure what the solution is.

- Q68 **Clive Efford:** But you seem to have prejudged it, if you don't mind me saying so, because you have said that you think it breaches the guidelines.

Dr Shah: Well, I said that that was my view, looking at it from the outside, but I am waiting to hear what the BBC will do about it.

- Q69 **Clive Efford:** We also read about activities of members of the board who try to influence decisions within the BBC. We often hear Robbie Gibb's name mentioned. Is that something that you also think you need to have an opinion about?

Dr Shah: It is something that the chair, were I to be chair, would examine: the exact role of different members of the board and what they do. But I cannot speak to what I would do about it until I am in post.

- Q70 **Clive Efford:** But you would take action if you felt that there was inappropriate behaviour? Aside from people making comments on social media, if there were an attempt to create some political bias within the BBC—

Dr Shah: You used the words "inappropriate behaviour". By definition, if it is inappropriate, were I to be chair I would have to examine that. It is quite an interesting debate, and I would need to know precisely the relationship between the directors, the non-execs, as it were, and the execs, because in previous boards there has been a very clear line separating the two. I would need to know exactly where that line is drawn within the BBC and to ensure that the non-execs stay on the right side of that line.

- Q71 **Clive Efford:** The point that I am trying to draw out is that we need to



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see consistency in the approach. If it is inappropriate for Gary Lineker in one area, which is social media, it is also inappropriate in others, and we need to bear that in mind when we are setting these standards.

Dr Shah: You use the word “consistency”. Social media guidelines are applied differently to different people. It is very clear, if you are a news presenter, what you cannot do, and there is quite a lot you just cannot do. But if you are not, it is greyer. It is more difficult to be cut and dried in the way you are suggesting, because the BBC is a complex, big organisation. Lots of people work for it and we need to balance different competing principles—freedom of expression against the desire for impartiality. It is about all the different principles and what you need to keep in mind.

What I would say is that were I to be chair, these are important questions that I would ask the executive. We would, as a board, think about whether those answers are good enough and whether they preserve the reputation of the BBC, because we have to act in the public interest, and that is what we need to do.

Q72 **Kevin Brennan:** I apologise for being late. I should declare that I have received some hospitality from the BBC and that I am a member of the all-party group on the BBC.

I want to follow up on what Clive was just asking about the independence of the BBC, your role as the chair, the board and so on. Obviously the board, and you as chair, have to take account of the Nolan principles in public life, which include being accountable, being honest and being open. You will be aware that in her recent book the former Culture Secretary wrote about an incident that happened when she was called to a meeting at No. 10 Downing Street, where she met Munira Mirza, a Downing Street aide, and Sir Robbie Gibb. I’m talking about Nadine Dorries, the former Culture Secretary: she met Robbie Gibb, obviously a member of the BBC board, at No. 10 Downing Street. Are you familiar with this? I imagine you would be, because you are somebody who takes note of these things.

Dr Shah: I know of the story, but I haven’t read the book.

Kevin Brennan: But you have seen accounts of it in the press, have you?

Dr Shah: I think I have seen Alan Rusbridger tweet on it, so I know a bit about it.

Q73 **Kevin Brennan:** I think that is sufficient knowledge for our purposes. Nadine Dorries says that they both—Sir Robbie and Munira Mirza—tried to persuade her to appoint Lord Gilbert as the Ofcom chair in preference to Lord Grade, who has been appointed and subsequently was confirmed by this Committee at a similar hearing to this one. Is it appropriate behaviour—you talk about inappropriate behaviour—for a member of the BBC board to attempt to influence the appointment of the chair of the body that regulates the BBC?

Dr Shah: The first thing I would say is that I knew nothing of this story until I read the Alan Rusbridger tweet.



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Kevin Brennan: The same as me. I knew nothing about it.

Dr Shah: I do not know anything about its veracity or anything. As far as I am aware, I understand that the current chair, Dame Elan, looked into it, reported back and said that there was no breach.

Q74 **Kevin Brennan:** Well, she wrote back to Alan Rusbridger. I have her letter here. I am afraid, although I am a big fan of Dame Elan Closs Stephens, that it is a classic example of obfuscation and not actually responding to rigorous interviewing, which you said you were very much in favour of earlier on, by BBC journalists.

In her letter back to Alan Rusbridger, she said—this is basically it—“I’ve spoken to Robbie. Having looked into the issues you raise and hearing his account, I am satisfied that no breach of the board’s code of practice has taken place. Rest assured, it’s important to say there’s no indication that the BBC has attempted to influence this process.” There is no response to the central story, no denial of the central story, no verification, which you would expect from journalists, of the central story that this meeting took place. At that meeting, a member of the BBC board attempted to influence the Secretary of State to appoint somebody as the chair of the regulator of the BBC. Is that a satisfactory answer? Does that fit in with the Nolan principles of openness, accountability, honesty, transparency?

Dr Shah: I am afraid I will have to repeat what I said: I know nothing of this story. I had no evidence in front of me. I don’t know. I can’t make a judgment call on—

Q75 **Kevin Brennan:** Okay. You are telling me, I think, that you do not know whether it is true. Would you like to find out whether it is true? Is that something, as chair of the BBC, your curiosity might lead you to want to find out—whether it was true?

Dr Shah: I would certainly have a conversation with Dame Elan about it.

Q76 **Kevin Brennan:** If it were true, would it be appropriate behaviour for a member of the BBC board, behaving in that way?

Dr Shah: I would be reluctant to answer hypotheticals—

Kevin Brennan: It is a really easy one. The answer is that it would be utterly inappropriate, wouldn’t it, for a member of the BBC—

Dr Shah: That is prejudging what the evidence actually is.

Kevin Brennan: I am not prejudging.

Dr Shah: I would wait for the evidence to come in front of me and talk to people before I come to a judgment based on an “if” point.

Q77 **Kevin Brennan:** You are unable to say to this Committee, as the appointee pro tem as chair of the BBC, whether, if a member of the BBC board attended a meeting at No. 10 Downing Street with an aide to the current Prime Minister and attempted at that meeting to influence a Cabinet Minister about the appointment of the chair of the regulator of



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the BBC, that would be ethically unacceptable.

Dr Shah: I do understand what you are saying, but you inserted the word “if” there. I do not feel that I am in a place where I can base my judgments on “if” statements.

Q78 **Kevin Brennan:** I put it to you that it would be a clear breach of the Nolan principles; it would be clearly inappropriate behaviour for a member of the BBC board to undertake; and it would be reasonable to expect that the chair of the BBC board would call out that behaviour and take suitable action, if that happened.

Dr Shah: Should the evidence turn out to be the case.

Q79 **Kevin Brennan:** Obviously various journalists have looked into this and we have had this obfuscation. What confidence can this Committee—if we agree to your appointment—and the general public and the licence fee payer have that you will rein in these sorts of rogue activities by Robbie Gibb?

Dr Shah: All I can say is that, were I to be the chair, I could not change the past, as the past is the past, but—

Kevin Brennan: But he is a current member of the board.

Dr Shah: My behaviour as the chair would be strictly according to the Nolan principles. I have always done that in the various public bodies that I have been in. There has never been, in any instance, any indication that I have been other than absolutely close to and abiding by the Nolan principles. I assure the Committee that I will do so were I to be made chair.

Q80 **Kevin Brennan:** To your knowledge, is there a BBC media strategy to say nothing about this story? To your knowledge, is there a BBC handling strategy to say nothing about this story?

Dr Shah: I have no knowledge of that.

Q81 **Kevin Brennan:** There seems to be an extraordinary amount of radio silence across the BBC’s journalistic outlook output and across the corporate response to the questions put to the BBC by Alan Rusbridger.

Dr Shah: I have no knowledge of that—none at all.

Q82 **Kevin Brennan:** Finally, a report in *The Guardian* about you and your appointment said that you were “thought to be an ally of Robbie Gibb, formerly the Downing Street director of communications for Theresa May”. Are you starting your new role by covering up for an ally?

Dr Shah: I hope that all the board members, were I to be chair, would be my allies. I obviously know Robbie—I was his boss a long time ago, and therefore I know him—but I hope that the BBC board would be my allies in my attempts to make the BBC an institution of which we can all be proud.

John Nicolson: Welcome, Dr Shah. We all know—Mr Green made reference to this—why the last BBC chair left. I think I heard you say to



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Mr Green that you had never been a member of any political party. I did not quite hear you say whether you had ever donated to any.

Dr Shah: No, I never have.

Q83 **John Nicolson:** You have never donated to any political party. Okay, that is absolutely clear, and interesting.

I mentioned right at the outset that you interviewed me for my first job at the BBC, and you appointed me as a reporter on the BBC's politics programme—a very rigorous Birtist programme—alongside Nick Robinson, Martha Kearney and John Rentoul. I have no idea what happened to any of them; I hope that they are okay. You also hired a Communist party member as the editor of the programme, David Aaronovitch. I think he has moved a little bit away from the Communist party these days. I suppose my point is that given that some of them were active Conservatives before they were journalists, and David Aaronovitch was an active communist, you are very happy with party political people at the BBC.

Dr Shah: No, I am not happy working with party political people within news and current affairs.

Q84 **John Nicolson:** They all were, and they were all news and current affairs people.

Dr Shah: Mr Aaronovitch was at London Weekend Television; he was a colleague of mine. When I became aware of that, I asked him to resign from the Communist party.

Q85 **John Nicolson:** Yes, and of course, under Communist party rules, he was not allowed to resign his membership immediately. He was a Communist party member for a year, while also editor of the BBC's politics programme, "On the Record", if I remember the details correctly, which I think I do. Your position, then, is obviously that you are happy for people to be party political and to have been active in politics, but once they go through the door of the BBC, they must leave their former politics at the door. Would that be fair?

Dr Shah: Absolutely.

Q86 **John Nicolson:** I agree with you about that. To pick up on what some of my colleagues have said, that presumably goes for members of the BBC board as well.

Dr Shah: It is a good question.

John Nicolson: What is the answer?

Dr Shah: Well, it is a good question; let me reflect on it. There is absolutely no question: when you are working in news and current affairs, you have to leave your politics at the door and not be part of that. As for BBC board members, are you talking about being an active politician and a member of a political party?



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John Nicolson: Yes.

Dr Shah: I do not know the answer to that question.

Q87 **John Nicolson:** That is a good answer, so let's go through it. Should you be a member of a political party and on the BBC board?

Dr Shah: I am very clear about news and current affairs; I am not so clear about the board.

Q88 **John Nicolson:** Isn't that something you should be clear about when you come for this interview?

Dr Shah: This interview? Well, you didn't provide me with your questions. If you had provided me with your questions, I might have had an answer.

Q89 **John Nicolson:** You will recall that when you interviewed me, you did not provide me with your questions.

Dr Shah: I do not recall the interview well; it was well over 30 years ago.

Q90 **John Nicolson:** Oh, I see; and had the interview been now, you would have provided me with the questions. I think not.

Let's return to my question. So you do not really have a view on whether, when you sit on the BBC board, you can be an active member of a political party?

Dr Shah: It rather depends on how it breaks down, I suppose. It would be very odd if the board all belonged to one political party; that would be weird. I think there is a balance. I don't know whether various members of the board are active members of political parties or not. I can certainly look into the question and come up with some view on it.

Q91 **John Nicolson:** I really want to know your view before you are appointed, rather than your view after you are appointed. I think it is important. I think we should know what people's politics are, if they are active politicians while BBC board members.

Dr Shah: If they are active politicians?

John Nicolson: Actively a member of a political party. As far as I am concerned, that is being active in politics. You have taken the trouble to enrol in a political party, and to pay the political party's fees. I put it to you that when you enter the BBC's board, you should set aside your party politics, and your commitment should be to the BBC, the BBC board and objectivity.

Dr Shah: That I agree with.

Q92 **John Nicolson:** Good. All of it?

Dr Shah: I do not think that people should bring in their party politics when discussing the BBC.

Q93 **John Nicolson:** Obviously there is a symbolism if you claim to be objective but retain your membership of a political party once you are on



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the board. If you want to make clear your objectivity, you should be able to say—as you have said—“I am not a member, and I have never been a member, of a political party.” You said that. I do not think they should have to say “I have never been a member of a political party,” but I put it to you that they should say “I am not a member of a political party, now that I have joined the board.”

Dr Shah: I do not know what the BBC rules are about the board, but I assume, taking your example of Mr Gibb—

John Nicolson: Sir Robbie, now.

Dr Shah: Sorry—Sir Robbie, and that he is a member of the Conservative party.

John Nicolson: I don't know.

Dr Shah: Presumably it is not outside the rules, but I think you raise a good point, Mr Nicolson. I think it is worth my considering it.

Q94 **John Nicolson:** Thank you, although I notice you haven't answered it.

How concerned were you when you heard that Sir Robbie—possibly a member of the Conservative party, possibly not, but you will find out—is an ex-Tory spin doctor and that he went up to “Newsnight” staff in an apparent attempt to teach them to be more impartial? You have been the head of BBC politics. When you had that job, how would you have felt if you heard that a member of the board had the presumption to go up and lecture some of your staff?

Dr Shah: It goes back to the question I was asked earlier about the role of the board members and crossing the line between the executive and the non-executive. If the board member is invited to discuss—

Q95 **John Nicolson:** He wasn't.

Dr Shah: I don't know that. I mean—

John Nicolson: I am telling you he wasn't.

Dr Shah: I don't know; I would have to ask. If they are invited, they should have a view and should talk about it.

Q96 **John Nicolson:** He was not invited, so let us set that to one side. He went up of his own volition. Of the programme he was lecturing them about—“Newsnight”—he said, “I don't watch it.” He didn't watch it, but he thought he would lecture them about what should be in it—about what should be in a programme that he did not watch. That is enormously inappropriate, is it not?

Dr Shah: Were I to be chair, I think the issue of the impartiality of different programmes is a matter for the board; those are big questions that we should consider as a collective. I would certainly hope, if I were to be chair, that we wouldn't have people stepping outside their non-executive roles.



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Q97 **John Nicolson:** That is a very political answer and very oblique. Why can you not just say, "No, it's inappropriate"?

Dr Shah: Mr Nicolson, I know you have asked this before, but one thing you will know is that, if I want to make a judgment on something—a behaviour or anything—I want to be given all the evidence and the circumstances; I want to be satisfied about what the situation is, how it came about, what the evidence was, what was said, whether—

Q98 **John Nicolson:** That is just a way of avoiding the question, because—

Dr Shah: No, it is not. It is about understanding the evidence. You yourself would not make a judgment—

Q99 **John Nicolson:** You are telling us that you talk to lots of people and that you know people on the inside, that you prepared for this interview and that you have talked to lots of people. You are deeply embedded in this culture, which of course is good for this job but, when there is an inconvenient question, you say, "I don't really know the detail of that; I would have to find out about it."

Dr Shah: It is your definition of "inconvenient". I am sticking to the evidence. If I may say—

Q100 **John Nicolson:** Let me put the rest of this to you, and then I will let you answer. The evidence for this is that multiple "Newsnight" staff said—they are on the record as saying this—that he came up, that he spoke to them, that lectured them about objectivity, and that they were annoyed. He did not pull one person to the side; he said it in the middle of the "Newsnight" office. Therefore, a lot of additional evidence is not required. What he said is in the public domain because a lot of "Newsnight" staff have said it, because he said it in the middle of their office, and they have reported on it. I put it to you that, for a non-executive director to behave like that in the past, the future or tonight—no matter when—is inappropriate, and that you should feel able to say so.

Dr Shah: You won't like my answer. I hear you, but were I to make that judgment, it would be based on my own gathering of evidence and my own understandings, rather than—again, forgive me for saying so—your account of it. Yours is one account of it, but I need to hear everybody else's account, including Sir Robbie's. What is his argument? If I am chair, to make a decision without gathering the facts and evidence first—

Q101 **John Nicolson:** One last attempt. As a matter of principle, if it had happened, would it have been inappropriate?

Dr Shah: This is Mr Brennan's question—if it had happened. As I said, let me wait for the evidence and then I can let you know.

Q102 **John Nicolson:** Ah. We know that you are not answering the question.

Let me tell you what the BBC website says about Robbie Gibb. I quote—*[Interruption.]* That is just to wake up Members of the House of Lords.

Steve Brine: It is very early.



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John Nicolson: You are right. It is just to tell them to roll over and have another doze.

Going back to my quote: "As one of the non-exec directors on the BBC Board, Robbie is responsible for upholding and protecting the independence of the BBC."

Dr Shah: This is on the website?

Q103 **John Nicolson:** Yes, the BBC's website. I think that is terrific and I think that it is exactly what he should be doing. However, as we have heard before, the allegation is that he summoned—her own word—the former Secretary of State to No. 10 Downing Street to lobby her on his preferred choice for the chair of Ofcom. If that had happened, that would be inappropriate. Ofcom is the independent regulator. If you did one of your detailed investigations that you have told us you will start doing, if you discovered in that detailed investigation that that was correct, and if you pinned him to the ropes and he acknowledged he had done that, what would you do?

Dr Shah: Mr Nicolson, you began that as a statement of an allegation; you then followed it up with two hypothetical ifs. I would simply repeat that I will not give you an answer based on a series of allegations and hypotheticals. I will collect the evidence and I will make the judgment based on an account of that event, were it to have taken place, from everyone on all sides. But it was in the past, and I would talk first of all to Dame Elan about it, who wrote formally saying that there was no breach. I would follow due process here rather than—forgive me—making a judgment call based on your hypotheticals.

Q104 **John Nicolson:** It is not my hypothetical; it is what the former Secretary of State says in her book. You either believe her or you do not. Believe me, I am the last person who would instinctively take as gospel truth anything that Ms Dorries says. None the less, given his track record, I suspect that either she is living in a complete fantasy world, or else there is an element of truth in it. He does seem to have form, Sir Robbie. Let us set him aside for a moment. Are members of the board allowed to lobby when it comes to current or future chairs of Ofcom?

Dr Shah: Lobby whom?

John Nicolson: Lobby a Secretary of State, for example. Would that be appropriate?

Dr Shah: It would not be anything to do with them.

John Nicolson: Good.

Dr Shah: Ofcom is the regulator.

Q105 **John Nicolson:** I'm glad that, at last, we have a clear answer that that would not be appropriate. That is good to know. Therefore, this is an important story. As you pointed out previously, you were on "Weekend World" and you were absolutely passionate about rigorous journalism.



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This is an important area of public policy; it is exactly the sort of thing where there should be rigorous journalism. Yet the BBC has done no story on this; there has been no journalism about this at all. Isn't that extraordinary? If you had been in news and current affairs, you would have said, "Come on, let's investigate this story."

Dr Shah: Again, I do not think you could accuse BBC journalism of not examining the BBC. It has done at various points. You are asking me to second-guess what is in the mind of the editors of programmes.

John Nicolson: No, I am asking what you think they should do.

Dr Shah: If I were the chair and I made that observation, it is effectively saying the same thing. As chair, you need to be careful about what you say at what level, because it carries weight and I would do it. An editorial question like that is the responsibility of the director-general. He is the editor-in-chief, and if I had an issue there I would talk to the editor-in-chief first.

Q106 **John Nicolson:** Right, so you wouldn't be telling journalists how to carry out their journalism. I hope you will explain that to Sir Robbie, because it sounds like you have quite firm views when it comes to the chair's position and are a little more oblique when it comes to members of the board.

Can I ask you for an undertaking that you will find out about this—that you will find out if Sir Robbie went to "Newsnight" and lectured the staff, and you find out whether he attempted to influence the chair of Ofcom? You have already said several times that you will look into this carefully, so you will find this out. Can I confirm with you that you will not write with one of these answers palming off journalists, but that you will, in a proper Birtist way, address the issue and write to the Chair to give her the answers about what you have discovered?

Dr Shah: You have made a number of points there. Let me try to address them. On the issue of the story in the Nadine Dorries book, which I have not read, I will first talk to Dame Elan about how she handled it. Dame Elan was the one in charge of the response. I have no idea what she has done by way of investigation, but she has come up with answer. It would be right and proper for me to do that. I am happy to say that.

On "Newsnight", I share the difficulty here. I have already said that I need to find out. I am quite clear that the board is not in charge of the editorial decisions; that is the job of the director-general—

John Nicolson: We know that.

Dr Shah: So again, my instinct is to go to the editor-in-chief and ask him about that.

Q107 **John Nicolson:** And you will tell us what you find out?

Dr Shah: And find out whether he thinks—

John Nicolson: And you will tell us what you find out?



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Dr Shah: I will talk to the editor-in-chief.

John Nicolson: And you will tell us what you find out?

Dr Shah: Why not?

John Nicolson: Good. I look forward to a very detailed response from you.

Dr Shah: I am not sure how detailed it will be. I just said, "Why not?"

Q108 **John Nicolson:** I will take that as a yes.

You would not be getting this job unless the Government felt comfortable with you. You wouldn't be getting this job if the Government were scared of you, would you?

Dr Shah: That is a question to address to the Government, I suspect.

Q109 **John Nicolson:** Well, there is no Government, as a single entity, that one can ask such a question of, as you know. You are here and you are the UK Government's appointment. In the way of establishment appointments, the only people who get jobs like this under one political party are people the Government feel comfortable with. They were comfortable with the previous chair—mistakenly—and now with you. It's a concern, isn't it, that the high heid yin of the BBC is somebody the Government are not worried about. They appoint folk they think are either openly or secretly Tory to the Charity Commission, and the two finalists for Ofcom were both Conservatives. They must think, "This man, Samir Shah, he's a good guy. He's not going to cause us any problems."

Dr Shah: As I have already said, I am not a member of the Conservative party; I have not donated to the Conservative party—

Q110 **John Nicolson:** But will you stand up to pressure from Secretaries of State? That's the issue.

Dr Shah: I would hope that the decision is based on my experience. I have already articulated earlier the range of experience that I have, and I hope that is the basis on which they made me the preferred candidate.

Q111 **John Nicolson:** Of course, some people—your critics—would say that you did not stand up to a Secretary of State when you chaired the Geffrye museum, now the Museum of the Home. Two thirds of respondents to a public consultation wanted the statue of the slaver Geffrye removed from the front of the building. I know the building very well. The statue is not original; it is concrete. It is at the front of the building, it is 20th century and it is of no historical importance. None the less, in a consultation, locals wanted it taken down, taken inside and contextualised so that people understood that this man was a slaver.

Oliver Dowden, who was then Secretary of State, wrote to the Geffrye museum director and, in a very bullying email, said, "If you do what the locals want in the consultation, I will remove funding from the Geffrye Museum." That is something that would be illegal in Scotland and I think



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it should be illegal here as well. But you ended up rolling over, your critics say, and allowing that statue to remain. That would have been a good opportunity to show that you were politically independent.

Dr Shah: I obviously know that story extremely well. I lived through it. I was responsible for the actions taken, and I am afraid to tell you that it was far from my rolling over with Oliver Dowden, who was the Secretary of State at the time. I believe that to be the case. I did not accept the legitimacy of that consultation. It was, in my view, prejudicial. It was not done by Ipsos MORI. It was a self-selecting sample. It was, if you remember, the heat of the topple the statues movement. It was a very febrile atmosphere. There was a great deal of disruption and there was a great push to try and make a very quick decision. It was very difficult. I did not think, as we were guardians of the museum, that we should make such an irreversible decision in such speed and such haste.

John Nicolson: It was not really irreversible, because you could have put the statue right back up again if you changed your mind.

Dr Shah: I am answering the question. I did not roll over to the Secretary of State. It was my view. Now, that view did not go down particularly well with a number of people. Nevertheless, it was my view. My strong concern, which I discussed with the Secretary of State, was that for a chair of a board of a museum, we had no guidance on how to deal with contested heritage. There was no guidance at all. As a result, I was part of a contested heritage group, and we have now created those guidelines so that any chair, of any board, having to deal with contested heritage has a route map of how to handle it.

What happened at that time was that the consultation turned up. It was just a kind of online consultation with no rigour. We did not talk to all the stakeholders—we have all sorts of stakeholders for that museum. We did not talk to everybody. So I was not certain about that at all. It wasn't a question of rolling over. I am afraid to say I believed I was doing the right thing.

Q112 **John Nicolson:** I disagree with you. I think the statue should have been brought indoors and contextualised rather than kept outside. But my point really is that I saw the correspondence and I thought the Secretary of State's tone was bullying and inappropriate.

Finally, Dr Shah, you obviously have many fine qualities and great qualifications for this job, but this interview is ultimately a bit of a farce, isn't it? We cannot stop you getting this job; you have got it already. One of my colleagues asked you, "Even if we said we didn't want to give it to you, would you stand aside?" Interestingly, using exactly the same words as your predecessor, Richard Sharp, when he was asked the same question by this Committee, you didn't say, "Of course I would." You said "I'd reflect on the reasons," which is very Sir Humphrey.

Dr Shah: What I would say is that is consistent. I have always said throughout all these questions you have asked me that I would like the evidence before I make a judgement. The evidence in this case is what are



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the reasons? I didn't say I wouldn't, but I would base it on evidence. And my consistent response to every question is that while I understand what you have all said to me, as chair I will wait to hear the evidence and then make a judgement. That is the case over this as well.

Do not think that if you were to decide that I was not suitable, that I would brush it aside because it happens to be the case that I would take it very seriously indeed. I would be very disappointed if you said so, but I would take it seriously, and if the reasons you set out were compelling, then I would.

John Nicolson: I wish you lots of luck with your new job.

Damian Green: We have had a lot of discussion about hypotheticals over the last 20 minutes. I have checked: Robbie Gibb is not a member of the Conservative party any more, and indeed I have sent round on our group's WhatsApp the invitation from somebody called "Stu"—I assume he was editor of "Newsnight" at the time—for Robbie Gibb to come and speak to the "Newsnight" staff. That was clearly a point at issue—whether he was invited or just barged in. Everyone can see the invitation to him.

Dr Shah: Thank you for that clarification.

Q113 **Simon Jupp:** Good morning, Dr Shah. What do you see as your role, if you were to be chair, about decisions where cuts should be made to balance the books? We know that the licence fee is going to go up to £169.50. That was not what the BBC originally wanted, but the Government have made it clear that they want to keep the increase as low as possible. What is your role as chair in that process, and to look at how you salami-slice the future of the BBC?

Dr Shah: You mean how to deal with this gap, which I have been told is around £90 million, with what has been agreed as a licence fee, which is in addition to all the other—

Simon Jupp: We know all that.

Dr Shah: I feel I am repeating myself a bit here, but I would say that it is a matter for the director-general to give the board what his plans are to meet that £90 million.

Q114 **Simon Jupp:** Do you have any red lines then, which is a different way of asking the question?

Dr Shah: I think that it would be inappropriate to have red lines as such, but I do have—

Q115 **Simon Jupp:** So anything is up for grabs?

Dr Shah: My instinctive view would be that the BBC is now operating in a very complex media world where there is a lot of choice for the audience and a lot of competition for the audience—they have a lot of things to listen to. The important thing for the BBC in that world is to remain distinctive—so offering something different—and to try to make



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programmes that offer value to the audience. One of the criteria of where the £90 million should fall would be distinctiveness. Try and protect those areas where you make distinctive programmes.

Q116 **Simon Jupp:** If the director-general came to you with a plan that you did not think met that—in other words, it did not keep the BBC distinctive—

Dr Shah: Yes, it did not prioritise distinctiveness.

Simon Jupp: Exactly. What would you do?

Dr Shah: Well, first of all, the board would collectively have to come to a view, and I would invite the director-general to rethink it.

Simon Jupp: Right. Okay.

Dr Shah: Distinctiveness is so important, and I do not think that the director-general would disagree.

Q117 **Simon Jupp:** Let's talk about distinctiveness. One of the distinctive roles of the BBC is to provide local radio services because the commercial competition has largely disappeared across the country. How do you think that the cuts to local radio programming were handled? You are obviously involved in the production area of "Politics London" and "Politics South East", but over the road in those newsrooms, there are now fewer people, fewer programmes and fewer bits of local output. Was that handled well?

Dr Shah: Was it handled well?

Simon Jupp: Yeah.

Dr Shah: There has been a lot of negative reaction to it, that much I have read.

Q118 **Simon Jupp:** That is a nice summary, but do you think that it was handled well?

Dr Shah: Well, again, you consistently ask me questions to which I do not know the answer. How do I judge whether it has been handled well other than with what I read?

Q119 **Simon Jupp:** Can I put it to you that you would make an excellent politician, if you ever decided to go into politics? I could learn a couple of tips from you, and that is not an insult—it is actually a compliment. The issue here is that I want to know your view. You have been part of the BBC in the past. You have worked with programmes that are broadcast on a regional basis. Do you think that the way in which the BBC dealt with the cuts to local radio, which are vast, was handled well? It is a yes or no question.

Dr Shah: If I may say so, it is not a yes or no question. It really is not. Again, I think that the context is that—

Q120 **Simon Jupp:** If you cannot have a view as a chair, what is the point of



the role?

Dr Shah: Let me try to put it another way. Any decision taken by anybody or any person has a price attached to it. You can focus on the price and say, "Well, that's not very well handled, is it?" The question is, what were the alternative decisions available to meet the budgetary requirements? What were the costs of those alternative decisions? In that context, was that decision the right decision to make? That is the first question, and I do not know what the alternatives were. Having decided—

Simon Jupp: Going back to your point about distinctiveness—

Dr Shah: May I finish?

Q121 **Simon Jupp:** Going back to your point about distinctiveness, BBC local radio services are distinctive. No one else provides them. Therefore, that encroaches somewhat into your territory of thinking, and surely that goes over your belief of what those cuts could look like?

Dr Shah: The point about the distinctiveness criterion is that it should help guide the cuts. Nevertheless, given the scale of the cuts—a 30% drop in income over the last 10 years—inevitably, programmes that could be distinctive will have to go. That is what is happening.

Q122 **Simon Jupp:** I am sure you would have more of a view if they were going to cut BBC South East and "Politics London", wouldn't you?

Dr Shah: From a programme maker's point of view, but maybe not from—well, let me tell you—

Simon Jupp: Surely you would from both sides.

Dr Shah: If it happened when I was chair of the BBC, I would have to take a different view. I have a personal view.

Q123 **Simon Jupp:** So you would take a different view if it affected the programmes that you have previously been involved in?

Dr Shah: I do not think that, as chair, I should be influenced by any programme that I happened to be involved in.

Q124 **Simon Jupp:** I am going to give up on that, because I am clearly not going to get an answer from you that is clear—I can put on the record that it has been a complete hash-up.

What impact will the below-inflation rise in the licence fee have on the ability of the BBC to deliver its remit, in your view? Briefly, if I may, because we are running out of time.

Dr Shah: It will have an impact, but I would just say before that that the BBC gets a lot of money out of the licence fee. It is a lot of money. We need to be sure that we are using that money as well as possible. It is always good to have more money, of course—you can do more things. It is disappointing that there is that £90 million cut on top of everything else. It will be damaging, and I would want to find out what that impact is. Again, it goes back—



Simon Jupp: To keep things distinctive, right?

Dr Shah: It all goes back to choices. If you are Tim Davie and you have to deal with that £90 million, you have a choice: how do you deal with it? There will be lots of choices on the table. My job as the chair would be to interrogate those choices and work out the cost of each choice and the best way forward. It is never a straightforward, "This is the only way to go forward." It isn't. It is always a choice.

Q125 **Simon Jupp:** I think there is a big saving to be made in BBC Sport, but we will move on from that.

Can we talk about the BBC outside of London, and whether people in the south-west, which is my region, and in the north-east, the north-west and the east of England get good value for money from the licence fee from local programming—local news; politics programmes on a Sunday morning recorded on a Friday afternoon; local radio—and generally from how it reflects all the nations and regions? Do you think it is currently good value for money, and is that something you would look at if you became chair?

Dr Shah: I will absolutely be looking at that. There is no question. It seems to me that one of the chronic issues facing the BBC is that when we look at all the statistics, the level of support for the BBC declines as you head north and outside. That has been a situation for a long time. The BBC has made a lot of effort there. It pushed programme-making out to Northern Ireland and Scotland—some great programmes. Mr Nicolson will know that, I am sure. I am a great devotee of drama. I loved "Shetland"; I thought "Shetland" was one of the best dramas that came out. Now, of course, "Vigil" has happened. I am a huge fan of police procedurals in Northern Ireland, and "Blue Lights", which was amazing. There is a lot of work there.

Nevertheless, the reviews and statistics keep saying that support for the BBC and for the idea that people are getting value for money declines as we go north. If I had a criterion of success, it would be to somehow stop that and turn it around. There is a real—

Q126 **Simon Jupp:** Dare I suggest that reversing some of the BBC local radio cuts may help with that?

I want to move on to something else. We have seen the BBC make a big play of the idea of moving staff out of London in recent years. I put it to you that moving staff who are from London to other regions does not change the way the BBC behaves, comes across, or anything else like that, because those people are not of that region. With that in mind, do you still want to see more of the BBC moving outside of London, and where would you like it to go?

Dr Shah: I addressed that briefly earlier. It is a very good point. It is important to say that it is not just moving people in programmes, it is also moving power. My model in my head is things like Granada, where people from that area people the organisation and commission network programming. I think we do need to move. I don't know, but I don't think



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there is much resistance to that. It is quite important that the BBC does that and gives real power to nations and regions to make programmes for the network as much as for themselves locally. I think it is really important.

Q127 **Simon Jupp:** That means you are very focused on our local output being protected. That is what I hear.

Dr Shah: Local output being protected and the ability of Newcastle to produce programmes for the network by people who live there—by people who belong and live—

Q128 **Simon Jupp:** So not correspondents from London coming all the way to the south-west when there are already very good staff in the south-west?

Dr Shah: Pulling people from London does not change the content.

Simon Jupp: On that, we agree. Thank you for sharing your opinion on that. That was a marked change from the rest of the session.

Q129 **Chair:** Finally, Dr Shah, your responses to our questionnaire ahead of this session suggested that we should assess your performance based on whether the BBC is ultimately more sustainably funded and more relevant at the end of, or during, your tenure? How confident are you that those are achievable?

Dr Shah: I think it will be very hard to do. The BBC faces lots of challenges there, but I am absolutely committed to that being how we should be judged. It is a cliché to say that the media landscape is changing, but it really is, especially for the younger generation. The BBC needs to offer value to every single household and every single generation of licence fee payers. It has a great reason to do so. It is a great force for public good. There is a real prize here: that the BBC continues to be relevant and salient to people's lives over the next 10 to 15 years. I will do what I can to try to make that happen.

Q130 **Chair:** There is a reason why the BBC is sometimes referred to as Auntie: because it has a very trusted, much loved place in all our lives. It is the place that we often turn to in times of trouble. It has been a constant throughout all our upbringings. It has got childhood memories, the news that we often rely upon, the entertainment we all love and the local content that keeps us informed about what is going on in our local area.

You are now potentially taking on a role alongside Auntie where you are effectively grandad. You have got the chairman's role, which gives you oversight over the whole thing. What would be your message? Here is an opportunity for you to send a message to the viewers, the listeners and those who take on board the BBC's digital content about why they should trust you in your stewardship role of this great institution. What is your message for them via this Committee?

Dr Shah: My message to the viewer, the listener and the licence payer is that I will do everything in my power to make the BBC of value to you and to your household. I will ensure that it represents you, that it reflects you,



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that you see yourself in it and that you see others in it, and that it becomes something that you care about and that matters to you.

Q131 **Chair:** Is there anything else that you would like to say to the Committee before we let you escape today?

Dr Shah: No, I am fine. Thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you very much for your time today. It has been a great pleasure to meet you.