

Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: The work of the BBC, HC 331

Monday 24 November 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 24 November 2025.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dame Caroline Dinenage (Chair); Mr Bayo Alaba; Vicky Foxcroft; Damian Hinds; Dr Rupa Huq; Natasha Irons; Liz Jarvis; Jeff Smith; Cameron Thomas.

Questions 217-387

Witnesses

[I](#): Caroline Daniel, former editorial adviser, BBC Editorial Guidelines and Standards Committee; and Michael Prescott, former editorial adviser, BBC Editorial Guidelines and Standards Committee.

[II](#): Dr Samir Shah CBE, Chair, BBC; Sir Robbie Gibb, non-executive member, BBC Board and Editorial Guidelines and Standards Committee; and Caroline Thomson, non-executive member, BBC Board and Editorial Guidelines and Standards Committee.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Caroline Daniel and Michael Prescott.

Q217 Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's meeting of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, on the work of the BBC. Our first panel is Caroline Daniel and Michael Prescott, former external editorial advisers for the BBC editorial guidelines and standards committee. Thank you both for being with us.

Today's hearing stems from the memo that was written by Mr Prescott and sent to the BBC board, raising questions about editorial standards and impartiality, and that subsequently found its way into the media. Initially, we asked the BBC for the memo and its response to the concerns raised, and we had invited Mr Prescott to appear, but as the days went on and the BBC seemed unwilling or unable to respond to the growing concern, we decided to hold a broader session to look not only at the issues raised in the memo, but at the governance of the BBC, not least because of the resignations of the director general and the head of news, and then, on Friday, the resignation of Shumeet Banerji

as a non-executive member of the board.

You will not be surprised to know that since we announced the session we have received a lot of correspondence from a lot of different people with very different views of the BBC and its reporting. We will not be publishing that, but we are grateful to everyone who took the time to contact us. We also requested and have received confidential board papers from the EGSC relating to the "Panorama" broadcast, and from the board in response to Mr Prescott's memo. We will not be publishing those either, but they will inform our questioning, especially of the second panel. I remind Members to declare any interests before they ask their questions.

Welcome, Michael and Caroline. Michael, we are here because a memo that you wrote was the catalyst for the resignation of three members of the board, including the director general. The corporation now faces a \$1 billion lawsuit from the President of one of our closest allies. I do not need to spell out the seriousness of that for everyone in the room or those watching but, suffice to say, it cannot be overstated that it is a critical time for the BBC and for public service broadcasting in general. How did we get here?

Michael Prescott: I suppose the saga does begin with the memo that I wrote. At the most fundamental level, I wrote that memo—let me be clear—because I am a strong supporter of the BBC. The BBC employs talented professionals across all its factual and non-factual programmes, and most people in this country, certainly myself included, might go so far as to say that they love the BBC.

What troubled me was that during my three years on the BBC standards committee we kept seeing incipient problems that I thought were not being tackled properly. Indeed, I thought the problems were getting worse. What was especially troubling was that it was all happening at the time when the BBC faces this fabulous, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

because in the era of fake news the BBC really can become the go-to provider of news for the entire world. I think that is something that could happen, and I would like it to happen, but it can happen successfully only if the BBC does a better job of addressing the incipient and growing problems of the type that the standards committee kept identifying. That is why I tried to alert the BBC board to what was going on, and thereafter sent the memo on to Ofcom and DCMS.

There was no ideology at play here—no party politics. To take the example of the US elections report that came before the committee, if it had found that Kamala Harris had been misrepresented, not Donald Trump, I would have acted in exactly the same way, because I do not want the BBC's coverage skewed this way or that way. I just want it to be impartial, accurate and fair.

Q218 Chair: Were you surprised that your memo about BBC editorial standards led to the resignation of the head of BBC News and then the director general?

Michael Prescott: I was, because I never envisaged events playing out in the way they did. I was hoping that the concerns I had could and would be addressed privately. In the first instance, that was why I wrote to the board.

For reasons I can go into if you wish, it became pretty clear to me that the board was not taking stuff as seriously as I had hoped and assumed it would, so I then sent the memo on to Ofcom and DCMS. I am very clear—members of this Committee are experts on this stuff; you will know this—that Ofcom and DCMS have very limited powers over the BBC, and rightly so, because the BBC is independent. Nevertheless, I had hoped that someone senior, be it at DCMS or from Ofcom, might have a classic “quiet word” with the high-ups at the BBC, saying, “You are taking this with adequate seriousness, aren’t you?” Indeed, we now know, since the leak, that Michael Grade at Ofcom has said—I hope I am not misrecalling this—that he was planning to have some kind of discussion with the BBC. I was hoping it could all be sorted out fairly quietly.

As it happens, I think six days after I sent the memo to Ofcom and DCMS, there it was in the *Telegraph*. That then led to this whole sequence of events, including the resignations you mention—resignations which I take absolutely no pleasure in.

Q219 Chair: In his resignation statement, Tim Davie described the BBC as “a critical ingredient of a healthy society” and said: “We should champion it, not weaponise it.” Who do you think he was aiming that comment at?

Michael Prescott: I saw that. Look, obviously you would have to ask Tim Davie himself, but my suspicion is that the last bit of his remark was targeted at big C Conservatives, who were piling in after this appeared in *The Telegraph*. The whole chain of events was not ideal from my point of view. By the way, I don’t want to be rude: if anyone who saw that memo and its contents took it seriously and had concerns—including big C Conservatives—I am glad. I do not want people to think I am getting at



HOUSE OF COMMONS

one party rather than the other. But it is a matter of fact that because you had these big C Conservatives coming out and welcoming it, some people jumped to the conclusion that some sort of ideological exercise was going on. But from my point of view, there really wasn't. I do not want the BBC leaning this way or that way; I just want it straight, impartial and fair.

Q220 Chair: In her resignation statement, Deborah Turness said that "recent allegations that BBC News is institutionally biased are wrong." Do you think the BBC is institutionally biased?

Michael Prescott: No, I don't. I am sure someone is going to correct me pretty quickly if I am wrong, but I just reread the memo yet again, outside the door, and I do not think I used that phrase anywhere in the memo, and I do not think it is institutionally biased.

Let's be very clear: tons of stuff that the BBC does, both factual programming and non-factual programming, is world class. I was a political correspondent at the *Daily Mirror*, *The Sunday Times* and other places for 14 years. I think the standard of BBC Westminster is exemplary, and that is why I keep saying that these were incipient problems. We were finding the odd problem here and the odd problem there. The crucial thing, when I say "the odd problem here and there", that every single thing we spotted, as per my memo, seemed to me to have systemic causes. The root of my disagreement, and slight concern even today, is that the BBC was not—I hope they will change, but will they?—treating these as having systemic causes. There is real work that needs to be done at the BBC.

Q221 Chair: Do you think the failings you highlighted were serious enough to require the resignation of the DG and the head of news?

Michael Prescott: Not if they had a plan to get on top of things and treat these things as systemic problems. Look, I am keenly aware—I do not want to come before you sounding like I'm some sort of pompous figure. It is not necessarily for me—humble old me—to tell the director general of the BBC exactly how to do his job. But you have asked me a straight question. I would have hoped they would get on top of these problems and start sorting them out in a systemic and more methodical way, and everything would have been fine.

Q222 Chair: What do you think, Caroline?

Caroline Daniel: My experience was that the BBC took issues of impartiality extremely seriously. We have all heard Tim Davie put impartiality at the centre of his time as director general. In the three years I was involved with the BBC, and prior to that with the Serota review, I felt it was a continuous process—an active debate. These are dynamic issues, and often very complicated issues, of impartiality. They are decided in the context of individual programmes, on a daily basis, across thousands of hours of coverage. There was a healthy debate. You have heard from Michael; in the EGSC it was a healthy debate, and often a very robust debate about some of these issues. But was the BBC willing to have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

a proper conversation—a debate—and actually take action? In my view, yes, they were.

Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Q223 **Jeff Smith:** Before we get into the issues arising from the memo, can we talk about the role of the editorial guidelines and standards committee? You are here, obviously, as external advisers to it. Can you talk about its purpose, and how each of you were recruited and appointed to it?

Caroline Daniel: I first got involved with the BBC via the Nick Serota review. I had spent 20 years in journalism, most of it at the *Financial Times*, but also at the *New Statesman* and *The Economist* magazine. The BBC really matters to me. As an institution, I think it is extremely important and, as Michael said, particularly in an era of AI—I spend a lot of time on AI—when 52% of the internet is supposed to be AI generated. I think it is an extraordinarily important institution to get this right.

I worked on the Nick Serota review for about six months—it was a significant review—and then when the opportunity came up to become an editorial adviser to the committee, I was very keen to help to enforce what we had found in the Serota review. There are multiple recommendations in the Serota review, which I can walk through, but at a high level, one included having broader editorial advisers on the committee. That is what led to us being appointed. Part of that was led by Ofcom, which wanted to expand the range of editorial opinion available to the BBC.

The second thing that came out of the Serota review, which was a key part of our implementation and actually the day-to-day work of the committee, was the introduction of new thematic reviews. These are really significant pieces of work. They took many months of work. There were usually hundreds of interviews behind them, and they were very comprehensive reviews of impartiality in BBC coverage. We looked at immigration, for example, and the committee looked at the role of the coverage of the economy. These were very important pieces of work. They are comprehensive and extremely detailed, and they are ongoing.

Alongside that, there were independent reviews of programmes, there was monitoring of impartiality, and new guidelines were initiated in terms of training. That is a quick sketch. In the end, we had 39 recommendations from the Serota review, which we were involved in implementing on behalf of the committee. A lot of the work in the first two years was very much about implementing the Serota review and the outcomes.

Michael Prescott: That is a fantastic run-through by Caroline. Is there any bit of your question that you think is unaddressed that I can actually add value on?

Q224 **Jeff Smith:** Am I right to read into what Caroline said that in the thematic reviews the committee is looking not just at things that have gone wrong, but proactively at future challenges?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Caroline Daniel: Yes. One of the committee's key tasks is future editorial risks. Michael's account gives a personal view of issues on the committee for him. One of the issues I am particularly interested in is the role of AI, which is really important, and whether the BBC is embracing AI and thinking about it appropriately. In an era of fake news, that is even more important, so we did have reviews looking at the role of AI at the BBC.

When I left the BBC and the role, one of the issues I spoke to Chris Saul about was how far we are making sure the committee continues to have enough time for really deep dives into future editorial risks. Much longer sessions on some of those issues would be really welcome.

Michael Prescott: Again, Caroline has summarised it fantastically. The thematic reviews are proactive. They are not waiting for an obvious thing to go wrong or analysing whether something was quite right, which was the case with a lot of things in my memo. But even on the thematic reviews, my disagreement with the BBC is about the thoroughness with which it takes action and follows things through in this area of editorial standards.

One of the thematic reviews, which I think may have been the first one, was on tax and spend and how the BBC covers issues to do with the economy—Government tax and spending, and so on. There were a number of recommendations from that, with one of them being, for example, that it should become routine that if someone on a news current affairs show says, "We need more money spent on x", they should be challenged with, "Well, that's fine, but what's the trade-off? Do you want tax to go up?" That was one of the many recommendations of the review, but it is a very simple to one to understand.

I remember that when the conclusions came before the committee—I think it was my first or second meeting—I asked what the follow-up was going to be. At that stage, I did not know the ins and outs of how every bit of the BBC worked, so I said, "After each news or current affairs show, will there be a tick list that includes the question, 'Were people challenged in accordance with these new recommendations?'" I was pretty much told, "Don't worry about it. Everyone knows this report. Everyone in the BBC has read it and takes it very seriously."

Now, one way or another—partly because of my long years as a journalist for 20 years—I know all sorts of people in the BBC, from a junior sub-editor I worked with in the 1980s to very senior people. Not one person I spoke to had read the report. Very few were aware of it. Later, when we got follow-up reports, they did not give a gold star, with 10 out of 10 for implementation. I'm afraid that, at every step of the way, the BBC fell short on thoroughness when it came to implementation.

Q225 **Jeff Smith:** To what extent is that the fault of the committee? You talked about systemic problems; where do they lie?

Michael Prescott: I'm afraid to say that it is ultimately with management. The standards committee has independent advisers—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Caroline and myself—and non-executive members. I do give credit to management, by the way. This may sound a trivial point, but I was always impressed with it: the meetings would go on for two or three hours, and the director general, head of news and deputy director of news always made time. They fully attended, and paid full attention.

To your question, I do not think the committee was at fault. I just think that the BBC had a bit of a blind spot when it came to following through as methodically as I—I appreciate that I am only one individual—thought they should.

Q226 Jeff Smith: Is that the fault of individuals? You talked about it being systemic, but it sounds like you are putting the blame on individuals for not following through.

Michael Prescott: I do not know whether it is a management culture thing or an excess of faith in how things will be implemented down at programme editor level, but that is exactly the kind of thing I would like them to look into. You are now almost—borderline—talking about these systemic faults that I am so obsessed about. I think they needed to look at why the implementation was not better.

Q227 Chair: Caroline, Michael wrote in his memo that he found Jonathan Munro and Deborah Turness quite “defensive” when issues were raised. Did you?

Caroline Daniel: I think the BBC is the most scrutinised media organisation in the country. From my experience at the *Financial Times*, it is a very different level of public scrutiny. It is scrutinised, obviously, by this Committee, by members of the public, through editorial complaints and by its audience. There are obviously many ways to make a compliant to the BBC. Are there times when they are necessarily defensive on some issues in that context? Yes. But as a broad characterisation, I would say that I did not find the BBC to be defensive.

I found the BBC to be actively engaged in discussions about how to improve issues of partiality on very complicated subjects. This is a live, dynamic debate where the context changes all the time. It is not one and done; this is obviously a live debate. There can be differences of opinion about whether the BBC went far enough on some of the issues that were raised in the committee. Some of the issues raised were significant, but what is important is that the BBC was raising them itself. They were coming up via the EGSC, which commissioned research from David Grossman to help to facilitate that robust debate and review of impartiality.

Q228 Chair: You guys, as independent advisers to the EGSC, had this unique opportunity to be almost a fly on the wall of how the committee was working, so give us a flavour of how decisions were reached. Would you say there was a degree of camaraderie and common purpose when it came to the pursuit of impartiality and journalistic integrity on the EGSC?

Caroline Daniel: I found it to be an active debate in the committee. You will hear from Robbie in your next panel. He is robust in how he expresses



HOUSE OF COMMONS

his opinion, and he wants the BBC to do well. Michael has given an account of some of the issues that we covered in the committee, but most of the committee was involved in looking at things like editorial complaints, monitoring impartiality across the BBC, looking at reviews of the BBC and thinking ahead about issues that were coming up.

We debated a broad range of issues on the committee. It was not always a contested space, but there were times when there were significant issues to be discussed by the committee. Obviously you have seen some of the research from David Grossman, which is in Michael's report, and that of course led to an important discussion. I would say that, each time, the BBC executive team would come back and debate those issues with us. Ultimately, we were both advisers to the committee, and it was for the committee itself—the four board members—to work out what significant action should be taken next.

Q229 Chair: From what you just said, it sounds like some of the committee members were more vocal, or more dominant in the conversation than others.

Caroline Daniel: I wouldn't agree. It was a very open committee. People could say what they thought.

Q230 Chair: The EGSC has been politicised in the way that it came to some of these decisions. In *The Guardian* this morning, it suggests that all members came from a certain political viewpoint. Is that your experience?

Caroline Daniel: That would not be my characterisation of how the committee worked, no.

Michael Prescott: I endorse everything Caroline says. Most of it was great. They were very respectful, open discussions. Most of the decisions that were taken were unanimous. I know there are some people saying, "This is a weird tick list that Prescott has come up with in his memo," but my memo simply quotes extensively internal BBC reports, and maybe with one or one and a half exceptions, they were all commissioned by the full committee. There was an awful lot of consensus. I hope I do not end up being a broken record, but the one area where there was not consensus was those reports by David Grossman—fabulous, very professional ex-"Newsnight" reporter. The reports he was coming through with, many of them quoted in my memo, there was not unanimity in how to respond to those—clearly; you can see it in the memo. Other than that, I would totally endorse what Caroline says.

Q231 Chair: And there was no one member of that committee who was more dominant than any other.

Michael Prescott: No. I don't think so—that was never my impression.

Q232 Cameron Thomas: Mr Prescott, you just said that the BBC is not institutionally biased. What is your bias, if you have one?

Michael Prescott: It is always a tough job, spotting your own biases. You know when you read about these "centrist dads"—I think I am a centrist



HOUSE OF COMMONS

dad. That would probably cover it. Actually, to that question, I know you have folks have not gone here so far, but there has been a lot of stuff in some of the papers about Robbie Gibb. The Chair was asking whether one personality was more dominant than another; you are asking about my preferences. I am no ideological soulmate of Robbie Gibb, for example—I am a centrist dad.

Q233 Cameron Thomas: I'm a centrist dad too, but a company that you work for received more than £100,000 from Larry Ellison, a Republican megadonor. You will be aware that Donald Trump has removed funding from a lot of public service broadcasters. Is it true that you actually want the BBC to be impartial, based on those affiliations?

Michael Prescott: Yes, that is totally true—of course it is.

Q234 Cameron Thomas: You said there is some real work to be done at the BBC. Along what lines? Do you think any of that work should be done at the boardroom level?

Michael Prescott: I think it is a job for the executive, overseen by bodies like the board and the standards committee. If I give you an example, it might help explain what I mean. One of my sadnesses was that, when this thing leaked into the public domain, so much focus—although I understand why—went on the Trump “Panorama”. The thing I felt most passionately about was when the BBC put out one day, over 12 hours, on all its bulletins, a story saying that ethnic minority people in this country were being charged more for their insurance purely because of their ethnicity. When David Grossman looked into it, he found the story to be utterly untrue. It is a dreadful thing to have put out, particularly given that it is wrong. It must have been deeply upsetting for many people out there, particularly ethnic minority people who heard that story all day long. Anyway, it was not true.

You just have to ask yourself, “How could the BBC get this so wrong? Who had the idea of doing this story? Who conceived of it? Who did the initial research? Who did the initial reporting? Who wrote the script? Which editors, across the whole of the BBC, all day, cleared a completely untrue report?” There were multiple levels of editorial failure. Now, we never got a good accounting for that at the standards committee, and I would have expected, with a better culture when it came to these things, a complete look at every single failure, and ideas for correction. Many times at the committee meetings when things came up—many of them in my memo—I said, “This makes me worry about recruitment, training, professional standards, the systems and the processes.”

In the chairman's memo, I know that he tries to say, “Oh, all this stuff has been resolved. We dealt with it all.” To me, what I was frequently seeing was that the BBC's idea of dealing with something was to change the editors around and tweak the written guidelines, but to take the story I just mentioned, there never seemed to be any willingness to look into exactly what went wrong there and whether there were deep implications.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Of course, since the memo came out, you have had people like Mark Urban, the very respected former BBC correspondent, who has done a piece on Substack—I do not whether you have read it, but it is worth reading. In that piece, he is not criticising my memo—far from it—but he says that he thinks there are issues like this in the BBC, and there are deep cultural forces at play here. There is a lot for them to look at.

Q235 Cameron Thomas: You have mentioned the memo a few times. You have also told us that you sent it to Ofcom and DCMS, and you had that meeting with the BBC. Two weeks later, *The Telegraph* had that memo, and it said that it was circulating around Government Departments. Do you have any idea how that memo got to those other Departments or *The Daily Telegraph*?

Michael Prescott: No. Absolutely not. All that I know is what I have stated.

Q236 Cameron Thomas: Did you share that memo with anybody else beyond the BBC board?

Michael Prescott: Absolutely not—well, with Ofcom and DCMS, but beyond that, no.

Q237 Cameron Thomas: So there is a leak somewhere.

Michael Prescott: That seems to be the case.

Cameron Thomas: Any idea where that might be?

Michael Prescott: No, I have no idea.

Q238 Chair: Did you work with anyone else when you prepared your memo?

Michael Prescott: No, it was all my own work.

Q239 Natasha Irons: Thanks very much for coming in today. Caroline, you have mentioned the Serota review and talked about the depth of work involved. I want to pick up on a couple of points. The review found a culture of defensiveness at the BBC, especially around admitting mistakes, as the Chair mentioned. That was in 2021; have things improved?

Caroline Daniel: I think they have improved. We can point to things like Tim Davie on Glastonbury; that was a speedy apology, and rightly so. There are probably many other examples where the BBC has apologised over the last few years. I would say that the real issue is the culture of the BBC in the level of attention paid to these issues. Again, in my view, it was really significant that we had a robust committee to debate issues of impartiality, and that we had David Grossman being commissioned by the EGSC to ask questions about the BBC's coverage to help inform future coverage. I think there are few organisations where you have that level of auditing internally on a regular basis. This is an ongoing issue; this is not one and done in terms of managing these issues.

Q240 Natasha Irons: You mentioned Tim Davie's robust and very quick response to Glastonbury. Do you have any idea why the robust and quick



HOUSE OF COMMONS

response did not come this time around?

Caroline Daniel: I was not involved in the issues with the board, so I'm afraid that I was not privy to discussions, and I did not know that Michael had sent the report until I read about it in the newspaper.

Q241 **Natasha Irons:** Michael, do you have a view as to why there was a bit more of a delay when it came to a robust response?

Michael Prescott: When my memo had leaked?

Natasha Irons: Yes.

Michael Prescott: No. I know only the same as you: what I was reading in the newspapers. Sorry.

Q242 **Natasha Irons:** Fair enough. How has the Serota review changed working practices and culture practically at the BBC? We keep coming back culture and transparency, but how has it actually changed anything?

Caroline Daniel: I will give a few examples. First, there are internal programme reviews, which were reported on to the EGSC. If there were particular issues with a programme, they all led internally, and we were given a high-level view of whether the programme was performing well or not, and some of the outcomes were those reviews. It is frustrating and difficult for programme makers to have that additional level of insight into what is happening and to be asked questions, but I think that is important.

The thematic reviews are significant pieces of work. I point to the immigration review, which was a substantial piece of work by Madeleine Sumption. In fact, Madeleine continued to be involved with the BBC for another year, advising the BBC and going around the regions, speaking about immigration and the better ways to cover it, and asking questions. It was a very thorough process of her and her team continuing to act on behalf of the BBC, giving recommendations and advice, and being available as a resource on issues of immigration and how to cover it well, which is a challenging issue. In terms of specific practical impacts, those are two good examples.

I think a third example is performance reviews. Again, we understood that impartiality was becoming a big issue, which played into how people were being judged as good editors of programmes. It was an issue in terms of how impartiality was embedded into a new performance culture. Could there be improvements? Yes, and I have a few ideas on things that might continue to be improved, but I do think it had an impact. It also had a lot of focus on training, not surprisingly; you have lots of people coming in and out of the BBC. People who are outside the BBC also have to do the editorial training. I think that across a number of areas there was a systematic change in what we were doing on the committee and what we were seeing.

Q243 **Natasha Irons:** How, then, did we reach the position we are in now, where you, Michael, felt compelled to write your memo? Is there an issue around transparency at the BBC? Is there an issue with just being



transparent and honest when things go wrong?

Michael Prescott: I think there kind of is when it comes to self-criticism. Caroline has described the processes very well. The BBC does try to look at itself and it has done a lot of the right things and a lot of responsible things, but I think that when it comes to following through on actions, it is not always fantastic, and you do get levels of denial as per my memo. Whether it was the issues in covering the US presidential race or Israel-Gaza or whatever, you got these reports through from David Grossman and the management's response was to just plain deny it and say, "We don't agree with them." What was the rationale? Did they find David Grossman wrong on the facts or out-argue his rationale? No, they just disagreed with them and did not do anything.

Q244 **Chair:** To what extent do you think there is an issue with the comms at the BBC? It feels like there is some kind of muscle memory of how to mishandle allegations of editorial mishaps and mistakes. Is there a problem with their communication? Quite often you get a very defensive, very short statement that comes out in the initial period and then a bit more self-reflection and self-flagellation a bit further down the line. To what extent is that just my perception?

Michael Prescott: It is a mighty big organisation and sometimes it is difficult to check out all the facts internally and make the most powerful statement that you can. I think it is more to do with what I suspect are some cultural forces at work in the BBC. Even as I sit here before you now, I do not think the BBC has been very willing to look at things through that prism.

Q245 **Chair:** Do you feel that there is a culture endemic in the BBC?

Michael Prescott: I think there could be. I certainly do not claim to be an expert on this. I already commended to the Committee the piece by Mark Urban, who I think spent many decades in the BBC, and there are others. The things we were seeing and the management reaction to some of the issues that I outlined in my memo make me fear that that could be a component of what is going wrong. That is why at the start of this meeting I kept referring to incipient problems. I do not think this is catastrophic yet, but I do think that it seemed that things were getting worse. That was my honest perspective and hopefully it is reflected in the memo that you have read.

Q246 **Chair:** To what extent do you think it is that that undermines people's trust in the BBC?

Michael Prescott: Well, trust in the BBC is a big subject, isn't it? It is not even all party political. You have an urban/rural bias, possibly, and a London focus—London values versus values outside of the capital. There is a lot there.

Chair: Do you wish to expand?

Michael Prescott: On trust in the BBC?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Yes.

Michael Prescott: Well, this is kind of what my memo was about. The public expect the BBC to be honest, accurate, impartial and fair. It is most of the time. It needs to do a better job when it is caught out not being so. That's it.

Q247 **Chair:** Would you say one of its headlines would be that the BBC is defensive?

Michael Prescott: Yes, I would. For example—I hope I am not being boring continually referring back to this memo—another thing in my memo was that there was this strange episode with a group of Oxbridge historians calling themselves History Reclaimed. I think they sampled four or five programmes. In a carefully written report—they did not overclaim; they were honest about the limited number of shows they watched—they said, “We do seem to notice a tendency that in all these shows, instead of getting the foremost historical expert in the field, they are getting people who are far more inexperienced, and our suspicion is that that is because they are giving them controversial quotes rather than the best take you could possibly get.”

As per my report, I thought that was interesting and should be looked into because History Reclaimed also had a very simple fix, which was asking whether the BBC could have another look at who it was inviting in from the field of historians to comment on things. That was it. Would the BBC listen? No. In fact, there were then formal complaints—I am guessing from readers who had seen that report, and based on it—and the BBC rejected them all and accused History Reclaimed of cherry-picking, in a very snotty fashion. History Reclaimed did not claim to be doing more than that. They said, “We’ve watched four or five programmes; there might be a problem here. Could you take a look at it?” The answer was, “Formal findings: you’re wrong, you’re wrong, you’re wrong. We’re not talking to you.” Extraordinary.

Q248 **Chair:** Do you think the BBC is arrogant?

Michael Prescott: Not institutionally, no. When you run a big outfit like that—you will all appreciate this—you have to maintain staff morale and the management have to be seen to be defending their own folks. Believe it or not, even after that memo, I totally get that. But they get it a little bit wrong. I think that was one instance and there are others in the memo.

Q249 **Cameron Thomas:** Mr Prescott, is the BBC in a better place for the three resignations? Should public trust be greater or lower after them?

Michael Prescott: It is very hard to answer, because the answer depends on each individual citizen’s perception of what has gone on.

Q250 **Cameron Thomas:** You speak of culture; it starts from the top, does it not?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Michael Prescott: Usually, yes. You want to know, bluntly, whether I think it is better or worse for not having Tim Davie and the rest of them there.

Cameron Thomas *indicated assent.*

Michael Prescott: Let me answer this way. First, I took no pleasure in those people feeling compelled to leave their jobs. As regards Tim Davie in particular, for what little use or worth this is to him now, personally I always liked the guy and, most importantly, to the extent that inexperienced me can judge, he seemed to be doing a first-rate job across 80% or 90% of the portfolio. It was just that he had this blind spot on editorial failings. I think it is a bit of a tragedy he has gone. I thought he was a supreme talent, but he had this blind spot.

Cameron Thomas: Okay. Thank you.

Q251 **Chair:** Michael, were you pleased that your memo found its way into the press?

Michael Prescott: No—gosh.

Jeff Smith: Were you surprised?

Michael Prescott: Yes, I was surprised. First, as I think I said a little while ago, I was hoping this might be sorted out quietly, with the board, Ofcom and DCMS. Secondly—I alluded to this—believe it or not, I was hoping the memo would do good and result in a better BBC being quietly achieved. Then it was in *The Telegraph*. I am not criticising *The Telegraph*—they gave it a lot of space and took it very seriously—but in ideological terms *The Telegraph* appeals to a certain bit of the spectrum. I think the fact that they broke the story became a bit of a barrier to people elsewhere on the political spectrum taking this as seriously or thinking it really was as straightforward as it seems.

Q252 **Chair:** On your comment about Tim Davie having a bit of a blind spot in an editorial sense, to what extent do you think that is simply because the DG job is just too big for one person?

Michael Prescott: I have been thinking for a while that it is, and what has happened to Tim confirms that. Again, I am not here to claim that I am the biggest expert in the world on organisational design but, as you ask me—and I was an adviser to the committee—I think that the BBC might be well advised to consider having an editor-in-chief on the one hand and a CEO on the other. I very well remember the period in the 1980s when they did try that, and John Birt was at first not in charge of the whole enterprise, and the role was split. It is probably worth looking at that again.

Q253 **Chair:** Do you have a view on that, Caroline?

Caroline Daniel: My role was as an editorial adviser to the EGSC. The issues of whether the overall structure of the BBC and the governance for Tim versus the role is obviously for this Committee and the BBC board. It



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is a very large and complicated role, and it is very hard to get it right consistently. In previous times we have had a deputy director general of the BBC. It is such a large role and there are a lot of issues, so it might benefit from that.

Q254 Chair: Is that how you would rather see it split—a DG and a deputy DG? Or would you rather, as Michael suggests, have an editor-in-chief alongside a DG?

Caroline Daniel: I do not really have a perspective. I have a personal view, as an average person looking at this, but I do not believe that—

Chair: What is your personal view?

Caroline Daniel: My personal view is what I just said. It is a large job with a lot of responsibilities, and it is an important institution to get this right in.

Q255 Cameron Thomas: Mr Prescott, you spoke quite highly of Tim Davie. What was your relationship with Shumeet Banerji? Did you have a relationship with him?

Michael Prescott: No, I don't know the individual.

Q256 Vicky Foxcroft: You rightly pointed out that the "Panorama" programme has been picked up quite a lot, in terms of your note. It was discussed at two meetings of the EGSC, in January and May. Why do you think the EGSC failed to act satisfactorily at either meeting?

Michael Prescott: Probably the best way to answer that—it will certainly help me to give you a good answer—is if I go through the chronology. I happened to be at home and I watched that "Panorama". It struck me as having issues to do with balance; I did not think it was quite what I might have expected. I still was not too bothered, because I thought, "Oh, that's quite an anti-Trump programme, but they'll probably be just as hard on Kamala Harris next week," but they were not. I mentioned that at the committee, and David Grossman was asked to look into it all. He came back in January with the findings that are summarised in my memo.

The BBC executive did not seem—how shall I put it?—very open to accepting what David was saying. They were asked, and they very happily agreed—as I say, there is usually consensus on the committee—to go away and come back with a written response, having seemed, certainly to my recollection and I suspect others', not to be open to accepting what David was saying, even though his findings were so stark.

They came back in May with a written response—again, parts of the written response are quoted in my memo—and it was black and white: the management did not accept there was a problem either overall with the US presidential coverage or with the "Panorama" programme. It was as simple as that.

Q257 Jeff Smith: The Grossman report says that the coverage of the election issues was "generally excellent".



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Michael Prescott: Yes. I hope I have been clear that I am focusing on incipient problems that need addressing. In my memo—I was trying to summarise it all for the board of the BBC—I think it is seven points or something, kicking off with them having ignored or broken their own guidelines on use of opinion polling. There was a lot to the Grossman report.

It is good that you mentioned that, because it kind of gives you the context. That was very much the BBC management's view: it was great, they were excellent, and page 3 of David Grossman's report says it was all excellent. Well, there was a lot to praise. By the way, I have been a reporter, and I hope the BBC Washington staff do not think I am sitting here getting at them—I know they are doing tough jobs. But David Grossman did not give it an absolute gold star. There are a lot of issues, as summarised in my memo. Does that cover your point?

Q258 **Jeff Smith:** Well, I think there could be an accusation that you did not represent the Grossman report fairly in your memo, and that you picked up all the points that he made that were criticisms of the BBC, without stating the context, which was, generally speaking, that he was positive about the coverage, and had put forward these particular problems as issues that needed to be corrected for next time.

Michael Prescott: David Grossman would have to speak for himself. My take was, first, that he was being polite. Secondly, there were a lot of very specific instances in the full report, summarised in the memo, of things that had gone wrong. Remember that my memo to the board was conceived as a private memo to 14 people, and it was meant to be a call to action. I did not put in the stuff for celebration; it was very deliberately highlighting problems and faults that I felt were not being addressed properly.

Q259 **Vicky Foxcroft:** Going back to the "Panorama" documentary, you said you watched it on 6 January and that that was the point—

Michael Prescott: Sorry to interrupt—the show was just before the presidential race, so I think it was about late October.

Vicky Foxcroft: So you watched it, and that prompted you to put in complaints, even though there were no complaints about the "Panorama" documentary?

Michael Prescott: I would not characterise it as a complaint. That is not really how the standards committee worked. I watched the show, and even after watching it, although I thought, "There are a lot more anti-Trump witnesses than pro-Trump," and so on—I thought it was a bit of an anti-Trump programme; I did not think it was as fair and balanced as you might typically expect from the BBC—I was not too alarmed. And, by the way, I rather enjoyed the programme. I thought, "Oh, well, they'll probably do just as aggressive a look at Kamala Harris next week. That's why this was so aggressive on Trump." But there was not a balancing programme. I cannot remember now, and I would need to check whether I emailed David Grossman or raised it at the next committee meeting, but I



HOUSE OF COMMONS

simply said, "Could David have a look at the show?" I could have been wrong; actually, it could have been in line with the standards and all been fair enough. That is how it wound up being looked at.

Q260 Vicky Foxcroft: When did you include the "Panorama" programme in your memo? Was it at the start or later on?

Michael Prescott: My memo was written of a piece. Although it begins with the example of "Panorama", because I thought it was a stark example of the sorts of things that had gone wrong and were not being addressed—that is why I nosed off the memo on it—everything in the memo was written way after. My last standards committee meeting was June, and it was some months after that I started writing the memo.

Q261 Cameron Thomas: Mr Prescott, you mentioned that the 6 January documentary was not of the editorial standard that you expected, but that you thought they might be just as hard on Kamala Harris. It has occurred to you, has it not, that Kamala Harris was not found by the January 6th Committee to have played an active role in the Capitol riots?

Michael Prescott: Absolutely.

Cameron Thomas: What would such a companion documentary to the Donald Trump documentary look like?

Michael Prescott: The Trump "Panorama" looked at his history and track record as a politician—he has obviously been President once already—and purported to be trying to look at the secret of his appeal. It also looked at what the consequences might be of him winning. If he lost, he might face more lawsuits; if he won, he could crush them—that sort of thing. An equivalent look at Kamala Harris might be, "What is her track record? What is the secret of her political appeal? What would the consequences be if she won?" It is pretty straight up and down, really—or to me it seems so.

Q262 Cameron Thomas: Do you agree with Donald Trump's assertion that his reputation has been damaged by this documentary, considering that he was found to be a central figure in the insurrection, that he has been found by a civil court to be liable for sexual assault and that he has regularly boasted about sexual assault? Do you agree with Donald Trump that this documentary has harmed his image in some way?

Michael Prescott: If I could answer in two parts, first, I am supposing—but you will correct me if I am wrong—that I should restrain myself a little bit, given that there is potentially a legal action. All I can say is that I cannot think of anything that I agree with Donald Trump on.

Q263 Dr Huq: Very interesting. Thanks, both, for coming in. You have similar backgrounds in a way—Fleet Street and then the PR industry for a long time after that—but different conclusions. So this has been fascinating.

You were both advising the EGSC. I think Jeff asked this earlier, but how did you hear about the job? I am curious to know. A lot of our constituents would probably like to advise the BBC. Where does it get advertised? How



HOUSE OF COMMONS

did you hear about it?

Michael Prescott: Can I beg your indulgence and give you what may be a longer answer?

Dr Huq: A shorter one is probably better. I really just want to know how you got the job, not a long anecdote.

Michael Prescott: I come from a working-class background. I am the son of immigrants. I got into Oxford from the local state school partly because of the excellence of public service broadcasting. I used to quote the shows in my essays. I have been passionate about public service broadcasting for decades. I read every spit and cough about the BBC. I followed the Martin Bashir scandal. I saw that Nicholas Serota did a review—Caroline was part of it. I saw in the newspapers that one of the recommendations was to create this post, and I thought, “What a fantastic job. I’d love to get that.” I looked out for the advert and I applied.

Q264 **Dr Huq:** And was it advertised?

Caroline Daniel: Yes. It was publicly advertised. Obviously, I was aware that they might create the role, because it was one of the recommendations of the Serota review. I was very interested in making sure that the Serota review went somewhere and that the actions it recommended were actually implemented, and I wanted to play a part in that.

Q265 **Dr Huq:** I was just curious to know. Also, on the Grossman researcher role—he is not here, is he?—I am curious to know where these things are advertised. I have never seen those adverts.

Michael Prescott: You are probably better directing that at the chairman, because I don’t know. It wasn’t openly advertised, was it? I think it was, in effect, an internal appointment for researcher, but you would need to check with the Beeb.

Q266 **Dr Huq:** You have said to us, Michael—and I think in your memo as well—that you have never been part of a political party, that you are a centrist dad and that you have no axe to grind. It says somewhere that you “do not hold any hard and fast views on matters such as American politics”. But if you go through the memo, there are some quite interesting terms. “Lawfare” is one that is used by the MAGA generation; that is used as a fact. I think you also critique the phrase “reproductive rights”, which is fairly common currency—we talk about it in this Parliament.

You have also said that there should have been a programme that was equally aggressive towards Kamala Harris. Isn’t that a weird equivalence? Trump had had a term as President, and he had been found guilty of incitement? We know that that edit was very wrong. They should have indicated, like you would in written journalism with three dots, that these are two different parts of the speech. But some people are making conclusions. If you look at the things in the dossier, what have we got? We have Trump defence, trans and Gaza. Are these comments not all from one perspective?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Michael Prescott: Gosh. Thank you for the question. There is quite a lot there. On the selection of things that are in my memo, and that David Grossman looked at—you can check this with the BBC—I think there was only one that I suggested be looked at. In terms of that menu that you are referring to and saying it was a curious selection, the topics for David to look at were unanimously agreed by the whole committee, so they are not mine.

You mentioned “lawfare” and “reproductive rights”, and I think I am right that those are words that appeared in David Grossman’s reports. I am not saying this of you, but there is a lot of misapprehension out there online and so on. In a funny way, a lot of my memo wasn’t written by me; it was me quoting David Grossman’s internal BBC reports. I think it was him who made the point about lawfare. It was not meant to be a party political or ideological point. He was making a very simple point that in America, unlike in Britain, if you get a prosecuting counsel, they may carry a party political stripe and be a political appointee, and that that was important for audience understanding of the full context of the onslaught on Trump.

The term “reproductive rights” was in David Grossman’s American election report, where he was making the point that if correspondents use those terms as common parlance, there is a danger that you alienate part of the viewership who do not use that language. These were not my views; these were all me quoting from the internal BBC reports.

Q267 **Dr Huq:** But, Caroline, isn’t it the duty of all people on the board and the advisers to the board to represent all licence fee payers? That is millions and millions of people. It just looks like these particular hobby horse, culture war issues have been selected in one direction. Surely your responsibility is to all licence fee payers?

Michael Prescott: Do you mind if I jump in on this before you, Caroline?

Dr Huq: At the same time that you two served your term, there was a letter from 400 BBC employees. There are the all-staff meetings, including one just the week before last. We have been circulated a letter by 100 eminent BBC folk, including Dibleys and whatnot. Those are very different from the selectively picked examples here, which all seem to betray a political bias themselves.

Michael Prescott: I have seen that point of view expressed online and so on.

Dr Huq: You are giving us articles, but you could look at Matthew Parris in *The Spectator* and his view of the Trump documentary, which I watched last night. It was 12 seconds within a 70-minute show. It was wrong—it was a bad edit—but I am sure there is loads in there that Trump would have liked, such as the MAGA superfans showing their adoration for him.

Michael Prescott: This idea that there is an ideological or party political skew to the work that was going on is not entirely fair. You have got to realise that when those reports were commissioned, we did not know what was going to come back. Take for example the BBC’s coverage of US



HOUSE OF COMMONS

presidential elections. When the committee asked David to look at that, he could have come back with a completely clean bill of health.

Dr Huq: Which he largely did.

Michael Prescott: Hang on. It is possible, I suppose, to conceive that he might have come back saying, "You know what? We were a bit unfair on Kamala Harris, because Trump is so bombastic and says such outrageous things"—

Dr Huq: But there is no equivalence there.

Michael Prescott: Obviously, you are free to disagree, but it could have been that Grossman came back and said, "We have been a bit unfair to Kamala Harris because Trump is so bombastic that we ended up giving her too little airtime." As it happens, he came back saying that there was a skew against Trump's side, but we did not know in advance that that is what his finding would be, so I do not think that it is entirely fair to suggest that the committee had an ideological hue in commissioning the bits of work that it did.

Q268 **Dr Huq:** No, I am saying that of the memo, not the committee. You are saying that you have to sling an equal amount of mud, but surely the role of the journalist is to tell the truth.

Michael Prescott: Yes, sure.

Dr Huq: Do you have to find a tit-for-tat thing, or do you tell what happened?

Michael Prescott: I certainly agree with what you say about the truth and about things being balanced. But the stuff in my memo, I think, covers almost all the David Grossman reports. It is not as if there were 100 reports, I picked these ones and they have an ideological flavour to them. I mentioned most of the reports that were done, and they were almost always commissioned by the whole committee.

Caroline Daniel: It was a long report—20 pages—looking at US election coverage as a whole, and the point was to look at whether there are areas of concern, bias or inaccuracies that might become a systemic issue and that we have to address going forwards? I am not saying that that report was a completely clean bill of health; there were issues that the BBC had to address, including whether we are reporting appropriately individuals who are being quoted, and whether the balance of geography in where the BBC's operations were based in America was appropriate and representative of American coverage. In fact, the BBC realised that it probably needed to do more to change the balance of its geography. But what I took away from that report is that there was actually very good, powerful coverage of the US elections. I have a difference of opinion about how important the concerns were around the US election coverage as a whole, having read the David Grossman report.

Q269 **Dr Huq:** I am just thinking of this memo, which has had such an effect



HOUSE OF COMMONS

within a very short space of time. Our Committee is writing something before we have even seen the contents of the report. Within a week, two big heads have rolled, and another one since. You make a point about History Reclaimed. If you look into who these people are—they include Robert Tombs, who is a well-known Brexit person—they are all from a particular slant. I wonder if you are aware of your own biases in the examples you have chosen. For example, you say that you should not state that the idea that the Trump election was stolen was baseless. Do you think that the idea that the Trump election was stolen was baseless?

Michael Prescott: No, I absolutely do not. I do not remember that bit of the memo.

Q270 **Dr Huq:** On page 3 of the memo, it says something like he was found guilty of incitement by a Democrat-majority committee. Our Committee is majority Labour and we have a Conservative Chair. Are you saying that we are illegitimate?

Michael Prescott: Oh God, absolutely not! I am a great respecter of Parliament and the traditions of Parliament. I spent 15 years as a correspondent here.

On the bit that you are referring to, when the executive defended “Panorama” and was trying to argue that there was no problem with the video splicing, one member of management prayed in aid the prosecution of Trump and the committee finding that you refer to. That is the only reference to it in there.

I will deal with History Reclaimed because that was something I raised. It never led to a Grossman report, by the way; it was just one of my bugbears.

Dr Huq: You have raised it again in this sitting.

Michael Prescott: Yes. But all the rest of the stuff, as I keep saying, was not my tick list. These were reports commissioned by the entire committee for David Grossman to look into. We never knew what he would come back with. If you take the American presidential race, for example, he came back saying that it was a little bit unbalanced, but we did not know in advance that he would say that. On History Reclaimed, I can tell you, hand on heart, I never even googled the historians behind it; I just got that they were Oxbridge—

Dr Huq: I think you should, because they are not completely neutral people either, are they?

Michael Prescott: But you have to remember that all I was saying on the History Reclaimed thing—which still seems to me a small thing—was that they seemed to me, from what I read in the papers, very reasonable: they had spotted something little that was wrong, suggested something that sounded like a sensible fix, and the BBC would not even consider it.

Q271 **Damian Hinds:** To go back to the splicing, in his “sacred job” memo to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

us, Dr Shah mentions that since your memo, Mr Prescott, the corporation has had 500 complaints, which has prompted “further reflection.” As a result of that further reflection, the BBC now accepts that the splice gave the impression of “a direct call for violent action.” I remember the first time I saw the splice; I looked at it and thought, “Oh my God, that’s awful.” Then I checked a transcript of the speech itself, and that confirmed it. Were you surprised that it took the BBC multiple iterations and months to work out something as straightforward as the fact that that splice was that misleading?

Michael Prescott: Yes, in a word. In the memo, I talked about my great frustration and how I was writing to the board because of that frustration. That was a very easy example to understand—that we had a BBC management that would defend and stand by that video edit, which is exactly what was going on. That was one of the reasons I was in despair, but it was possibly the purest example.

Q272 **Damian Hinds:** Do you think the corporation has what you might call a “bigger truth” problem—that there is a bigger truth that the vast majority of BBC output is good, and therefore it is less important when something is misleading? Or that, on this specific episode of “Panorama”, there was a bigger truth the programme was trying to get across about that day on Capitol Hill and the character of President Trump, and therefore it did not matter so much that this thing was spliced in a way that created a specific impression that was clearly so misleading?

Michael Prescott: I think the truth is that we still do not know what went on within the “Panorama” production team—whether it was some weird kind of accident or someone working under pressure. We just do not know. Regarding the wider BBC, I have had people I know, and people I do not know, texting me, emailing me and so on, who were clearly appalled by that. So I do not think it is a bigger problem; it was just this curious management blind spot.

Damian Hinds: It was not just a management blind spot; lots of people must have had a blind spot, starting with the person who did it, then whoever was editing it, a producer—presumably somebody straight away. Obviously, it did not get the most massive audience, because people in general did not spot it, but many people must have seen it. Then your committee saw it, then it went up to the board. A lot of people apparently had a blind spot.

Michael Prescott: This is one of the most curious things about the whole saga, actually. I watched the programme, as I said, and I certainly did not spot that the video had been spliced. I had no idea, and I doubt—

Damian Hinds: It was a very good splice job—that is why.

Michael Prescott: It is interesting if you did, but I suspect—

Damian Hinds: No, I did not. It was an extremely good splice job where you could not see the seam. That is the point.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Michael Prescott: So you watched it and you did not realise it had happened. When I asked for the “Panorama” to be looked into, it was for reasons other than the video splicing—I thought there were other issues with it. Then the report came back. David Grossman, ex-“Newsnight”, a very respected, proper, fabulous BBC correspondent, had also spent time covering the US presidential election. It was one of those weird coincidences that the person who was asked by the standards committee to do a deep dive into “Panorama” was steeped in this material, because he had been out there covering it, and it was he who spotted the video splice. It was quite possible that, if it had been someone else asked to do a deep dive into “Panorama”, they might have come back still not spotting that. It was a curious turn of events.

Q273 **Damian Hinds:** That was in time for the January meeting. An awful lot of time has passed between January and November, so there were still a lot of people who had a blind spot. So after this thing had been identified—

Michael Prescott: That’s what I am saying.

Damian Hinds: I do not mean a literal blind spot, in that they did not spot the splice—I do not think anybody did—but rather that, its having been brought to people’s attention, a lot of people apparently overlooked it until, as Dr Shah says, having had 500 complaints after your memo, there has been a period of reflection.

Michael Prescott: I keep using the term blind spot, but you can use the terminology you want. They had a lack of sensitivity. They just had a different view about the video splice.

Q274 **Damian Hinds:** This question is for both of you. Do you agree that it is people who would like to see the demise of the BBC who are the ones—

Michael Prescott: Not me, by the way. I want it to be stronger.

Damian Hinds: No, no—let me finish my sentence. It is the people who would wish to see the demise of the BBC who ought to downplay this incident. The people who love the BBC and think it has a more important role than ever in the information meltdown and mosh pit of information and disinformation—they are the ones who will say that, when an incident like this comes along, it must be taken with the absolute utmost seriousness.

Michael Prescott: That sounds a very sensible point. People who love and support the BBC want the BBC to be at its best. That is what this whole thing has been about.

Caroline Daniel: Obviously, issues of trust are foundational to the BBC. It is very important that it takes inaccuracies extremely seriously. I would say—to echo Samir Shah—that it was regrettable that this was not recognised at the time. Even though “Panorama” was alerted, I think the BBC was too late to take action on it, but I would point to the fact that in the committee at the time it was a 20-page report, and the debate was really about a much broader, comprehensive view of US election coverage;



HOUSE OF COMMONS

it was not to micromanage a particular programme edit. Individual issues were typically dealt with by the editorial complaints unit, if there was an inaccuracy.

Q275 Damian Hinds: I am asking about a principle. I was asking about the splice—that is correct—but you could apply the same question to a number of other things in the memo. My question really was, for all the 99-point-something-per-cent output that is very high quality and unquestionable, is it not the case that if you really care about the future of the BBC, you really have to care about the zero-point-something per cent that goes wrong, taking that as absolutely seriously as it warrants?

Caroline Daniel: I agree with you. I think it is important, but I personally think that the BBC did take issues of impartiality and accuracy incredibly seriously. That is the reason why it is one of the most trusted news brands in the world.

Chair: Misinformation meltdown mosh pit.

Q276 Cameron Thomas: Mr Prescott, I happen to agree that this documentary aired a catalogue of interesting circumstances through such a large editorial process. My question is, prior to it airing, did that documentary deviate from the standard editorial or auditing processes in any way?

Michael Prescott: The short answer to that is that I don't know. That is exactly the kind of thing I was hoping the BBC would look into.

Cameron Thomas: Who would know?

Michael Prescott: I guess your best witness will be your next one: the BBC chairman may know about that. I only know what I saw on the screen and then what David Grossman reported.

Q277 Cameron Thomas: I have just realised that you did not quite answer my earlier question. Do you agree that Donald Trump's reputation has been tarnished by this documentary?

Michael Prescott: Probably not.

Q278 Cameron Thomas: You don't agree with him. Thank you. Caroline, I have largely not spoken with you yet—apologies. Have you seen David Grossman's report? Have you read it?

Caroline Daniel: Yes.

Q279 Cameron Thomas: Have you read Michael's memo?

Caroline Daniel: Yes.

Q280 Cameron Thomas: Would you agree that Michael's memo was an accurate reflection or response to that Grossman report?

Caroline Daniel: I would say that Michael's memo does not provide a comprehensive view of what was in the David Grossman report.

Q281 Cameron Thomas: What do you think was missing?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Caroline Daniel: I think the David Grossman report covered a lot of ground: significant areas like the coverage of the election and the use of polling; issues like who was being represented on programmes; and issues of impartiality. There was obviously a BBC response to it as well, which was also significant. They did engage with each of the details of the David Grossman report. Michael's account is a personal account rather than a comprehensive review of everything that was covered in the committee.

Q282 **Cameron Thomas:** Would you describe it as biased?

Caroline Daniel: I would not choose to characterise it that way. I think it is a personal account of what Michael wanted to bring before the board.

Michael Prescott: I think Caroline's remarks may well be fair, because—I am very open about this, and I think I even say it in the memo—it was meant to be an edited take on things. It was a primer for the board, hoping to get some action. They could then go away and—as I think I urged them to do in the memo—look at the full Grossman report. I do not think I would ever claim that it was fully comprehensive; it was edited highlights, intended to get action.

Cameron Thomas: Is there anything else you would like to add in answer to that question, Caroline?

Caroline Daniel: No.

Q283 **Jeff Smith:** Caroline, you said that the memo does not provide a comprehensive review of the Grossman report. Do you think it gives an accurate sense of the Grossman report?

Caroline Daniel: I repeat what I just said: I think Michael's review was not designed to be a comprehensive review of everything in the David Grossman report. When you read the David Grossman report in full, it is a broader reflection of the debate that the committee had about issues and anticipating issues in terms of both existing coverage—was there something we should be looking at more closely?—and whether there are actions that the BBC should be taking.

My personal interpretation was that the BBC engaged with it, the executive team responded and actions were taken. It was going to be an ongoing issue; Donald Trump defines the news waves at the moment. It was an important issue to think ahead about how we cover Donald Trump appropriately. My takeaways were very much focused on that broader representative view.

David Grossman's reports were not supposed to be comprehensive. They were quick takes and ad hoc research to help fuel a conversation in the committee, rather than the thematic reviews, which are much bigger picture and longer term, included lots of interviews and comprehensive research, and looked at a much broader range of programmes.

Q284 **Jeff Smith:** To be clear, the Grossman reports were the only ones that were asked for by the committee on this particular topic—there were no

others?

Caroline Daniel: No. In this case, no.

Q285 **Jeff Smith:** Michael, Dr Shah said that your memo is “a partial description of the evidence that EGSC received”. Is it fair to describe your memo as partial?

Michael Prescott: I don’t really think so. As I said, it was edited highlights intended to get action. I don’t know whether you want to call it partial or not.

Q286 **Jeff Smith:** Do you think it was impartial?

Michael Prescott: Well, there was nothing in it that would mislead the audience. I think it was a reasonable edit of all the areas concerned that arose out of the Grossman reports. In that sense, I suppose it would be fair, on the American one for example, to say that it is unbalanced, because I did not mention where David Grossman praised the coverage and I only mentioned where there were problems. I do not mean to sound arrogant, but I do not really apologise for that—it was 19 pages as it was, for one thing.

If you do read the full Grossman report—I do not know whether you are getting hold of it—into the American election coverage, see what you make of it, but my plea is this: wherever the BBC earns a gold star, that is great, but that does not mean it should not take the problem seriously. The first thing there was that it broke its own guidelines on how to use opinion polls. What was done about that afterwards, how did that problem occur and what is being done about that to prevent an accidental reoccurrence? Answer: we do not know.

Q287 **Jeff Smith:** Would you agree that they have acknowledged that that was an issue? I am looking at a quote that says that it is “the one significant exception to our usually excellent record of reporting polling”. That particular problem with that particular poll was acknowledged.

Michael Prescott: Yes. I should have said, by the way, that I really welcome the BBC chairman’s letter to you, where he says he is going to go through everything in my memo point by point, which is, in a way, all I wanted. The one worry I still have is whether the BBC will do that, treating every issue there as if it is a systemic problem until they can prove that it is not. They say they have responded to and acknowledged the issue about the opinion polling; okay, but were there systems that went wrong? If it was one single human error on one night, fine, but if not, there is a bigger problem. What has gone wrong here? They need to get under the bonnet and start fiddling around with a spanner a bit.

Q288 **Jeff Smith:** How do they demonstrate that they have fixed those systemic problems?

Michael Prescott: For starters, whoever takes the place of Caroline and me on the standards committee, hopefully it can persuade them that it has been doing a more thorough job and, if there is to be wider scrutiny, it

is for the BBC as an institution to figure that out. Of course, you as the Select Committee have an oversight role.

Q289 Mr Alaba: Michael, you made a comment about your communication being a primer for the board. You started off earlier by saying you were a strong supporter in your formative years and how important the BBC was. Many people in this room, myself included, think the BBC was very important to our education as well. Did you foresee the damage your memo would cause—

Michael Prescott: Absolutely not.

Mr Alaba: Sorry—I paused. My apologies. Did you not see a scenario in which that memo would be widely circulated?

Michael Prescott: No. As I say, it went to 14 members of the BBC board and then senior people at Ofcom and DCMS who, although the BBC is independent, have some role in terms of dialogue with the BBC. Also, looking back, what was I to do? I could have done nothing, but you can hopefully tell from the memo the level of my concern. I wanted someone, somewhere to start doing something.

Q290 Mr Alaba: I understand that, but you could argue that in some cases it has possibly been weaponised. You spoke about people on the political spectrum grasping it and trying to damage the BBC. I am just surprised that you are surprised that we have got to this point.

Michael Prescott: This is a personal view, but whether people at the BBC think this stuff has been weaponised or not, surely that is a secondary issue. There are very specific things that have been going wrong, detailed in the Grossman reports and in my memo. Now the BBC say they are going to look at them one by one. Hopefully they will treat them as systemic problems, in which case the BBC will end up stronger—and I want it stronger, so that it can conquer the globe.

You say, “Surely you realise there was a risk of damage.” Even as I sit here now, my hope and my genuine belief is that the BBC is going to end up stronger because of all this stuff, and it will be great; they can reach billions on this planet with their news and current affairs, given that we are in the era of fake news, if they get this stuff right.

Q291 Mr Alaba: Caroline, what is your view of how this has impacted the organisation?

Caroline Daniel: It has obviously been an extremely challenging time for the BBC. It is in the spotlight on issues of impartiality, which in my view the BBC was actively engaging with on a regular basis. As I point out, the committee was extremely robust, discussions were had, research was commissioned on a regular basis—and it was challenging research. I think that is a really healthy organisation and a very healthy debate.

Q292 Mr Alaba: The terms “systemic” and “processes” were used and there was mention of the editorial team possibly not listening, and you gave some examples, one of which was the misrepresentation of an ethnic minority

“penalty” in respect of insurance. The BBC acknowledged that that insurance story was wrong and published a correction in their 2024-25 annual report. Is that an example of the EGSC working as intended?

Michael Prescott: Well, as you know, there is a complaints process that occurs quite separately from the standards committee. Any member of the public can complain, and that is dealt with by certain machinery. The standards committee keeps an eye on that and sees what it thinks of it. On the particular story that you mentioned and the BBC apology, sorry for being a broken record, but this comes back to whether a problem is systemic or not. How did they get that so wrong? There were multiple levels of failure there, and I know of nowhere—it certainly did not come before the standards committee—that the BBC treated it as such and looked into every stage of failure and what they could learn from what went wrong.

Q293 **Mr Alaba:** Given the resolution of the insurance story, why did you not mention that, or reiterate it, in your memo?

Michael Prescott: The insurance story?

Mr Alaba: Yes.

Michael Prescott: It is in my memo.

Mr Alaba: Why did you not mention that the BBC had dealt with it?

Michael Prescott: Because the point I was trying to make to the board was the same one I am trying to make to you. I think I have run through the possible levels of editorial failure: “Who commissioned it? What did the programme editors make of it before it went out? Where was the professional scepticism over this claim?”. I was trying to make the point to the board that I think the BBC should look at that, among many others, as if it was a systemic problem, and I wanted them to support me in that notion.

Q294 **Mr Alaba:** Caroline, can you give me an example where the EGSC considered a subject that concerned you and reached a consensus that you were satisfied with?

Caroline Daniel: On the insurance article, action was taken. There was a debate at the board. It was embarrassing for the team, in terms of their understanding of data journalism, and further actions were taken, including more training within the BBC on understanding probability and having proper understanding of economics across some of the team. New people were also put in to the data science team. In my view, that counts as action, and significant action from the EGSC. If it had not come up in the EGSC, it would probably have come up via the editorial complaints unit, if there had been concerns. That is another part of our monitoring. It is not just the committee; the editorial complaints unit also has a significant role in looking at issues of inaccuracy.

Another example is that we looked at the role of BBC Verify and issues of misinformation at the BBC. Are there issues, in terms of complaints



HOUSE OF COMMONS

coming in, that show that we should be concerned about whether reporters were falling for fake news. In my view, we should be spending a lot of time on those issues.

Going forward, if I had one piece of advice for Chris Saul, it is that there should be longer, deeper dives into some of these really big, existential issues for the BBC's journalism. It really matters to get that right, particularly in an era when trust is incredibly important, and when the internet is becoming a source of massive-scale misinformation. In my view, the BBC has engaged with that over the last three years, and we did have conversations about that. I would like to see the BBC focusing even more on that going forward, along with having a wider range of views and more and deeper dives on issues like that.

Q295 **Mr Alaba:** Okay; thank you. Michael, are there any other examples?

Michael Prescott: Of when the committee operated by consensus? In a funny way, in my mind it probably operated by consensus on almost everything. The glaring exception—of course, this is why we are all here—was the management's response to some of David Grossman's more critical findings. There was no consensus: the management went one way and some members of the committee remained unhappy with it. You can clearly see that I remained unhappy with it.

Mr Alaba: Thank you.

Q296 **Natasha Irons:** Given that there was an investigation into the insurance piece, action was taken and the BBC acknowledged there was an issue, how much was that a systemic issue? Or was it just a cock-up? It is conspiracy versus cock-up. Is it just that a mistake was made, the BBC investigated and it was corrected? Given that action was taken, why did you feel the need to put it into your memo?

Michael Prescott: To me, a journalistic error might be that I misspell someone's name or get the date wrong. And of course errors occur—I do not want to come across as someone who thinks otherwise or is intolerant of the occasional human failure—but this report was way more than that.

The BBC launched this service called Verify. The clue is in the name: it is supposed to be even better than your ordinary BBC in that you can check everything out and there is hard data. To launch Verify, that report was emblazoned across "BBC Breakfast", "Lunchtime News", "BBC News at Six"—all the bulletins. This was a big deal at the BBC. This was, "We've got a shocking new exclusive for the world." What went wrong surely cannot have been one person's error. How did they have the notion to study this idea that insurance companies would be charging ethnic minority people more? Who compiled the report? Who checked it? Who edited it? Which output editor said it was okay? Of all the people across the BBC who heard that report, was there no professional scepticism? "Geez, we'd better have another look at that." It was multiple levels of failure, and that is why I put it in the memo.

Q297 **Natasha Irons:** Caroline has just outlined that better training has been



HOUSE OF COMMONS

put in place for data analysis, because anyone can look at a spreadsheet and come up with an answer for anything. She has outlined the actions that were taken off the back of that clear failure. Where that has happened, is that not the BBC behaving in the way it should behave?

Michael Prescott: That is a great question. You have zeroed in on an area of potential continuing disagreement between me and the BBC—you will probably get more on this from the chairman. On that one, yes, they organised some retraining and had a look into their use of statistics. Feel free to disagree, but to me, that is just not enough. This was a horrendous and embarrassing error—and one that, by the way, could have damaged community relations in this country. If you are a black teenager sitting at home all day listening to that stuff, how would it make you feel? And it was all untrue. I think they should have had what you might call a full-on inquest, and I am not clear they ever did.

Q298 **Chair:** Can I talk to you about BBC Arabic? It comes in for some quite heavy criticism in your memo. We know that BBC Arabic has to apologise for around two articles a week at the moment. In answer to our letter, the BBC chairman said that they are determined to attempt to tackle the underlying problems identified by both the EGSC and Mr Prescott. Are those steps sufficient, Michael?

Michael Prescott: In my view, it depends on what he means by that, but I take him to be in good faith and am delighted by that promise. Vis-à-vis BBC Arabic, I alluded in the memo to how there have been some changes in personnel—a measure in which the director general seems to place great faith. My view is that switching out an editor or two is not enough. When you have got such a shocking catalogue of seeming errors, there must be more going on than just the editor, on that day, not being quite up to the job.

Q299 **Dr Huq:** We have established that for the two of you the role was advertised, but for the David Grossman role it was internal.

Michael Prescott: I think it was, but I am really not sure about the Grossman one. It is probably best to ask the Beeb.

Dr Huq: It just seems that the memo was very reliant on that one individual. You said to Jeff you didn't entertain any other evidence. Surely, isn't it incumbent on you to take evidence from a range of different sources? Throughout your time there was also the "Gaza: Doctors Under Attack" documentary, which a lot of staff were exercised about at the all-staff meeting. There were various other things that happened. The NUJ and BECTU have written to us. There are 21,000 members of BBC staff, hundreds of whom attend the all-staff meetings. Why was none of their evidence in your memo? Why was it all slanted to one individual and one political point of view?

Michael Prescott: You can't boil the ocean, for one thing. My memo was what it was presented as being, which is a summary of internal reports that had come before the standards committee and not been acted on fully enough.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q300 **Dr Huq:** Okay. I also wonder what your relationship is with these gentlemen—with Robbie Gibb. The *FT* says you are a friend of his. Can you clear that up for us? And with David Grossman?

Michael Prescott: David Grossman I know only through his appointment to this role and the standards committee. I have known Robbie Gibb for a number of years. I think I first met him when I was working briefly for the political staff of the *Daily Mirror*. He worked for BBC Westminster. So I do know Robbie Gibb, but you have got to appreciate that in 14 to 15 years working as a political correspondent, it is probably not an exaggeration to say I got to know hundreds of people on a cross-party basis. Even today, I have got dozens and dozens of friends from that period of my life, and I have got as many Labour party friends and Lib Dem friends as Conservative friends. But yes, I do know Robbie.

Q301 **Dr Huq:** Would you call him a friend? Because there are all these rumours swirling around.

Michael Prescott: Yes, I think that's a fair description.

Q302 **Dr Huq:** Would you be prepared to publish the communications between the two of you in the lead up to the appointment and since the memo?

Michael Prescott: To the EGSC?

Dr Huq: To the Committee—to us.

Michael Prescott: Would I be prepared to publish what?

Dr Huq: Communications that you had in the run-up to getting the job—maybe to scotch the rumours that are out there—and since the memo was published. It mysteriously found its way to *The Telegraph*; nobody quite knows how.

Michael Prescott: On the first of your things—getting the job on the standards committee—that was openly advertised, and it was an open, competitive process. I am not sure quite what it is you are getting at there.

Dr Huq: The question was: would you publish communications that you had, such as emails and texts.

Michael Prescott: That is quite a precedent you are asking me to set. My last meeting of the standards committee was in June and I haven't seen him since then. I have had one conversation with him since then, and that's it.

Dr Huq: Okay, that is good to know.

Q303 **Cameron Thomas:** Mr Prescott, can you understand why somebody might find it suspicious that somebody who is described as a friend might have a role in that individual's appointment?

Michael Prescott: That is a fair enough question.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Cameron Thomas: If that is a fair enough question, will you submit the documentation?

Michael Prescott: Like I said, it is quite a precedent to set. To answer your question directly, I applied for the standards committee position as described. You had to put in a written submission and then there was an interview. The interview panel was made up of four people, one of whom was from HR. Feel free to criticise me, but I just took the point of view, "Well, the BBC does do that sort of thing well. If BBC HR are involved, fine."

Q304 **Cameron Thomas:** I am not criticising you. I am just suggesting that it is interesting that somebody you have described as a friend had a role in your appointment. Do you not think that that is unusual?

Michael Prescott: The thing is, if you operate in this country in the sphere of politics, the media and so on, it is not that unusual to come across people. It happens all the time. So unusual—well, I don't know.

Q305 **Chair:** Michael, if even a memo warning about issues of impartiality has issues with selective quoting and perceptions of bias, is there any hope that anyone can ever be an effective and trusted arbiter of impartiality?

Michael Prescott: The BBC gets as close as any organisation in the world ever has, and I think it is achievable so long as you are open, transparent, honest and—in a sense, this is what this session is about, is it not?—willing to take it on the chin when you get it wrong, looking into what has gone wrong thoroughly and putting in a full programme of reform if needed. I think it is achievable enough. By the way, the BBC is the best-positioned organisation in the world to do that, even with everything we are discussing—in my view.

Q306 **Chair:** That brings us to an end. I thank you so much for appearing in front of us this afternoon and for all your time. Is there anything that either of you would like to conclude with before we end today?

Caroline Daniel: No.

Michael Prescott: I do not think so. I would just say a big thank you, because this has been all over the news for whatever it is—three weeks now. I have deliberately avoided the media for numerous reasons, but not least because I have great respect for Parliament. Also, in a session like this, you can go through things so much more thoroughly than in one media interview, so I am really appreciative.

Chair: We are very grateful to you both for coming in to see us this afternoon and for answering all our very many questions.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Samir Shah, Sir Robbie Gibb and Caroline Thomson

Q307 **Chair:** We are back for our second panel: Dr Samir Shah, the chair of the BBC and of the BBC editorial guidelines and standards committee; Sir



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Robbie Gibb, a non-executive director of the BBC and a member of the BBC editorial guidelines and standards committee; and Caroline Thomson, a non-executive director of the BBC and also a member of the BBC editorial guidelines and standards committee. Thank you for appearing before us.

You probably saw the first panel, so I will not repeat my introduction to the session; suffice it to say, Dr Shah, you are once again in front of us at a point when the BBC is said to be in crisis and when the board appears to be in crisis, too. You probably recall that when the Committee first met you, we were a little frustrated that you seemed unable to take a definitive stance on anything. We wanted you to give us strong, unequivocal answers. I want to make sure that we start off on the right foot today.

Did the BBC block the head of news from apologising for the "Panorama" programme before 10 November?

Dr Shah: I will answer that question directly, but first, if I may, I will take this opportunity, to apologise to all the people who believe in the BBC, care for it, and wish it to survive and thrive. I apologise to the licence fee payer, who funds the BBC to deliver its mission. I apologise to the thousands of people who work for the BBC, to our staff who work with such dedication and commitment to deliver the output we all enjoy so much. I regret the mistakes that have been made and the impact that has had. I now come to the question that you asked, but may I ask you to repeat it for me, so that I can answer it directly?

Q308 **Chair:** Did you and the rest of the BBC board block the head of news from apologising for the "Panorama" programme on 10 November?

Dr Shah: To go back to the week in which the story broke in *The Telegraph*, you wrote to me, and I was writing the answer to you. I heard that news wanted to apologise for the splicing of the edit, with a white spark. I thought that was a necessary thing to do, but was not sufficient, because the fundamental issue here was the sequencing of the edit and the placing of the Proud Boys march. The real issue here was the impression left that President Trump, in his 6 January speech, had encouraged a call to violent action. What we had to apologise for was that, as well as for the splicing of the edit.

It is my view that editing interviews is a normal journalistic practice, so that in itself is not what the problem was. The problem was the impression that it led to: an impression that President Trump had called for direct, violent action. That was not the case, and that is what I thought needed to be apologised for. The answer to your question is, I did not think it was adequate; I thought it was necessary, but not sufficient.

Q309 **Chair:** If you felt that that was the case, why was there no apology when David Grossman first brought that to your attention?

Dr Shah: Do you mean in the EGSC meetings from January and May?

Chair: Yes.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Shah: That is a very fair question. Looking back, I think we should have made the decision earlier—in May, as it happens. In January, as you heard earlier, that report came about and the context was: how well do we review our own coverage? We do this constantly—how we did, what went well, what did not go well—and we examined how we cover the US elections as a general point. The report came back, as you have said, that the coverage was, on the whole, excellent, but that there were some real issues. At that meeting, there was also coverage of the Arabic service, which we may come back to.

As is normal, I invited news to give me a formal response to that research. The response came in May. When that response came, there is one thing that I would like to make clear: this was a constructive discussion that took place at the EGSC. Some very important observations were made in that report, which the executives took on. For me, one of the most interesting ones was the recognition about the story selection idea. I have a letter in front of me on the news report—you have it—which said that “BBC infrastructure is wholly resourced in the Democratic areas” and that “we need to move into other parts of the US” to get a better sense of opinion within it. That is an action that is going to be taken, and there will be movement, so our resources tap into not just the Democratic heartlands, where in a way we have too many resources. We need to move that out. I give that example simply to tell you that this was not a discussion where we had a defensive news response to some very serious issues. That was that.

When it came to the “Panorama” edit, there was a difference of opinion across the board. Looking back, I think it would have been better for us to pursue it then; I completely accept that. As we go into my understanding of how we got here, it seems to me that, along with editorial and governance, which are important issues that we will unpack, there is an issue about how quickly we respond, the speed of our response. Why do we not do it quickly enough? Why do we take so much time? This was another illustration of that. Clearly, we should have pursued it to the end and got to the bottom of it, not waited as we did, until it became a public discourse.

I have a lot of things to say about my relationship with Mr Prescott, that report and what he did—

Q310 **Chair:** We have lots of questions to come on to along that line. What I am trying to get to is that there has been a lot of speculation in the media that it was the inaction and delay by the BBC board—the press has reported that there was a dispute in the BBC board—that caused so much of the drama ever since. I am really interested to know why it took so long. Why did you not get on the front foot? You should have got on the front foot, whether with an apology or a robust defence; either would have been an acceptable way of responding, but there was that huge delay. Why? What was causing the delay? What were your reasons for delaying?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Shah: It seems to me that there were two timelines: one began with the EGSC report in January, and one was the week after the report was in some way leaked to the public by *The Telegraph*—do you mean that one?

Q311 **Chair:** As soon as *The Telegraph* started publishing the memo and its coverage of that, there was just a vacuum in the BBC for nearly a week, when no comment was given in any meaningful way to the substance of it. Why did you not get on the front foot with either an apology or some kind of defence of what had happened?

Dr Shah: Precisely because of the question you have just raised: I needed to understand what went wrong and to get the right answer. Getting the right answer was really important—

Q312 **Chair:** You knew what went wrong, because you had already had the Grossman report into this—

Dr Shah: No, no. I said that we reflected on it. In that week, I asked the director general to review the clip and whether there were any serious editorial breaches. There were. As an outcome of that, there was research that had to be done to get it right, and it took time to get it right, so we knew what the actual apology was for. I said, it was not just about the splicing, the editing; it was about the impression. That had to be done properly and investigated thoroughly.

As well as that, I was writing a response to you from the board. I have 13 board members, and I needed to make sure that they were aware of what I was writing, and that I had their support. That did, I admit, take time. Of course, it will always be better to be able to get out quickly, but it is as important for me to get it right and to get it supported by the board.

Q313 **Chair:** If the BBC had responded quicker, do you think the resignations might not have happened?

Dr Shah: That is a hypothetical I cannot answer. All I will say is that I think the resignation of the CEO of news was a very honourable act. It was right of her to take responsibility for an error in her division. As she herself said, “the buck stops with me”. In public life, it is rare to find people who accept that something went wrong in their own division, who accept responsibility and who take responsibility. I applaud her for that.

Q314 **Chair:** Your culture and media editor, Katie Razzall, reported: “Deborah Turness became more and more angry and frustrated as the week went on because she was prevented by the Board from putting out that apology.” Was that in some way to blame for the fact that she then resigned from her post?

Dr Shah: You will have to ask her. I have already repeated that I thought the apology that was on the table was necessary, but not sufficient.

Q315 **Chair:** Did you try to stop her from resigning?

Dr Shah: I spoke to the director general about it. The resignation or otherwise, of the head of news is a matter for the director general, not for the board or for the chair. My job is to test and challenge the director

general. Who he hires and who he does not hire underneath him is an operational editorial matter.

Q316 Chair: The director general resigned as well. Did you try to stop him from resigning?

Dr Shah: I did indeed, and I spent a great deal of time doing so. I do not think the director general should have resigned. I think that the act by the director of news was an honourable and proper act. I think she took responsibility, and I applaud her for doing so. I do not think that that meant that the director general also had to resign. However, when you read the director general's reason for resigning, you see that certainly this was one factor, but he also said there were many other factors that led to it. I wish, and the board wishes, that the director general had not resigned. He had our full confidence throughout.

Q317 Cameron Thomas: At an organisation as large as the BBC, I imagine it should have occurred to you that you could have put out an initial statement while you were still trying to get to grips with the gravity of what had happened, prior to a full apology. Did you receive pressure from anybody on the board to delay such an apology?

Dr Shah: Absolutely not. We did put out a full statement, which, looking back, was rather vanilla, as corporate BBC tends to do. We did do it to hold because I needed to put out a fuller statement but I needed to be sure that I was right about what I was saying. This is a very, very important error, and I needed to make sure that what I was apologising for was fully sourced and fully right. It needed to be right, and it took its time.

Q318 Cameron Thomas: The resignation of the director general is quite a big deal, is it not? When you tried to dissuade Tim Davie from his resignation, how did that conversation go?

Dr Shah: I do not think it is right for me to discuss private conversations between me and the director general.

Cameron Thomas: It might be if the BBC is at stake.

Dr Shah: I think confidential conversations need to remain confidential, but let me answer your question. I have got to know Tim very well over the past 18 months. He is an outstanding director general. He is extraordinarily good. His energy, his dedication, his commitment to the BBC cannot be gainsaid.

Cameron Thomas: But his commitment was broken.

Dr Shah: As you know from his statement, he felt responsible as editor-in-chief for the error. My view is that responsibility was taken by the chief of news and that was proportionate.

Q319 Chair: May I take you back to the response to the Committee's letter? On 4 November, you apologised on behalf of the BBC for the way that the Trump speech on 6 January was edited. Your words were, the BBC does



HOUSE OF COMMONS

"accept that the way the speech was edited did give the impression of a direct call for violent action. The BBC would like to apologise for that error of judgement."

Dr Shah, I have had a look at the BBC editorial guidelines. Section 3.4.25 of the BBC's editorial policy states that, "For news, factual and some factual entertainment content, unless clearly signalled to the audience or using reconstructions, content makers should not normally...inter-cut shots and sequences if the resulting juxtaposition of material leads to a materially misleading impression of events." It seems quite clear to me that the way that both "Newsnight" and "Panorama" edited this clip broke those BBC editorial guidelines. What I am trying to get to grips with is why it took a year to apologise for this failing, despite the EGSC, which you chair, voicing concerns about this programme on three separate occasions, and why no action was taken despite the fact that there was clear evidence of a breach of editorial guidelines.

Dr Shah: As I said, in the January meeting, that report came out. I then invited the news division to give me a formal response to it. That response took place in May. We discussed it then, and there was a different set of opinions around it. There was a plausible case for the edit, because the point of the programme was to deliver to the British audience; it was about the supporters of President Trump and what they were learning. There was a case, as it were, for the edit. This was discussed and debated and there was a difference of opinion.

I have already said we should have pursued it further at that time, and by pursuing it further, we should have investigated it in detail with the people responsible in the BBC. You must remember that that is an operational matter and not a matter in governance terms for the non-execs, but it is a matter that we could have pursued harder, and we should have done. Had we done so, what you have just read out would have come out and there would have been a formal response that this was a breach, and we would have then taken on—

Q320 **Chair:** What was the tipping point that prompted your apology? Was it the 500 letters of complaint to the BBC? The resignation of the director general? Was it the memo? Or was it the threat of legal action from the President of the United States?

Dr Shah: I am sorry. Say that again—the last one.

Chair: The threat of legal action from the President of the United States. What was the tipping point for suddenly deciding that an apology would be forthcoming? The memo? The director general going? The letters of complaint? Or the threat of legal action from the President?

Dr Shah: As I wrote to you, when the memo entered public discourse, there were a lot of complaints about it. We decided at that moment to reflect on and review the decision, and that is when we came out with the outcome that, yes, it was a mistake, an error of judgment, and that is what I wrote to you.

Q321 **Chair:** Just to be clear, had this not been covered by the memo and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

prompted all these letters of complaint, it would never have risen back to the surface.

Dr Shah: It is worth noting that in May we discussed that there had been no complaints to the BBC News about this. If that had happened, we could have looked at it. As I said, there was a discussion at the board about this. There was a debate. Because there had been no formal complaints, we wrongly let it rest. As you probably all know, very soon after that I was uncomfortable with that outcome and that result. It was not the only reason; I had a number of things over the time I have been chair that I worried about—the workings of the committee, whether it was properly defined, whether the relationship with the main board was precise enough, with the terms of reference for the advisers, and whether the composition was good.

I invited Chris Saul in June to look again. Long before this broke, I did think there were things to be done, and that process was under way. One of those things—maybe Caroline will talk about it—was what are the mechanics when there is disagreement within a board or at the committee? How do we deal with that in such a way that we do not cross that line between governance and editorial? It is an important line we hold, but it does seem to me that this has thrown up that question.

As I said, one of the questions I have to face is what were the governance failures here? What were the process failures? I think we do need to find a way, and Caroline is going to be looking into that. I had started the work with Chris Saul and there were some interim findings. We were under way. As you know, I listened intently to your conversation with Mr Prescott. I met him several times during that period. I invited him to talk to Chris Saul and they met to discuss it. After the letter went out I talked to him again. After we met the board I talked to him and I said, "I would like you to be engaged in fixing what is wrong with the EGSC and how we can get it to a state where you won't have cause to write such a letter again." I did that and he seemed to rise to it. So we were going to carry on.

This Committee should not think I ignored Mr Prescott. I did not. He raised some important questions that we need to answer. I have already said I do not think it was a rounded picture of what actually happened in the EGSC. You heard from your other witness that, in fact, the executive took many detailed actions. So it was not just a case of a report coming out and a defensive reaction. That is not an accurate account of what happened.

Q322 **Chair:** It was reported in the press quite a lot that the reason for the delay in the board responding to our letter, and indeed opining in any way on what had happened, was that there was a big difference of opinion at board level. Is that true?

Dr Shah: In May?

Chair: No, we are talking about recently in response to all the news that came out. You lost two very key, very senior members of the BBC team, and still we waited for you to say anything.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Shah: At the board meeting in October when we discussed the memo, we discussed it at length. There was a certain repeating of what happened in the EGSC, but it was important we discussed it. There were some differences of opinion, but we did agree on the next step at that meeting. That next step was for me to go back to Mr Prescott, discuss his email to the board and invite him to be part of reviewing how the EGSC could work better, to which he agreed. Then, as we know, a few days later, it was all over the press.

Q323 **Chair:** The memo hit the papers, but that is not what I asked you. There was this big delay between the newspapers covering this story and the board coming out with either a statement or a response to the letter that we wrote. It has been reported in the press that the reason for that delay was that there was a big dispute within the board about how to respond. In some cases, people said there was chaos in the board. How true is that?

Dr Shah: There was neither chaos nor delay. You wrote to me on the Tuesday, and I replied to you on the Monday—that was the deadline you gave me. During that time, I wanted to investigate what went wrong and get it right, and I needed to make sure that the board were with me. We discussed this. I do not think there was any chaos or difficulty there.

Caroline Thomson: I would just add, because I was obviously part of some of those discussions, that there was a continuing and sharp difference of opinion, between certainly the chairman and me, and some others on the board, with the director of news about whether we were going to apologise just for the edit, or whether the impact of the edit and the position of the Proud Boys material had given a misleading impression. We felt that it had. News continued to maintain that the impression given despite the edit was correct, because the gist of the speech by Trump had, for example, the use of the word fight 15 times, and only talked about peace once. They felt that the edit was justified, but it should have been a more transparent edit. We felt that the edit had led to a more profound problem. Indeed, your quotation of the editorial guidelines is absolutely right—we felt that it violated them.

Q324 **Natasha Irons:** Thanks so much for coming in today. Sir Robbie, in your view, what took the board so long to publish a response?

Sir Robbie Gibb: There was definitely a difference of opinion, and it was properly outlined by Samir and Caroline. From my perspective, the point I was making was that it was a serious error, and simply having an identifiable edit and apologising for that would not be enough, because what mattered was what the meaning was. On the one hand, you could argue that if you had a white flash that showed where the edit was, then that would be fine, and you apologise for not having the white flash. My view, and I think the editorial policy view, is that if the meaning of the new constructed white flash edit followed by the Proud Boys gave the impression that it was a call to arms, it was a breach of editorial policy. That was my view. I was not involved in the discussions with the delay to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the reply to this Committee's letter, but I was involved in the debate in the board, and this was the point I was making.

Q325 Natasha Irons: It seems that not much was said publicly in response to the memo in general. How did we get to this point where we were not really responding to the points that were raised publicly for quite a long time?

Dr Shah: Do you mean the response to Michael Prescott's memo to the board in total?

Natasha Irons: Yes. Publicly, we did not hear anything about it until the leak. Why was there such a delay in giving a robust response to it?

Dr Shah: I suppose you would say the delay begins the moment it is leaked publicly. Let me make that separate from the response to the memo itself. When the memo came and I spoke to Mr Prescott about it, it went to the board. Accompanying that memo was a separate note, which provided, in my view, a more rounded picture of all that which you heard in your early session—all the different issues that the EGSC has examined, and also the actions taken. Mr Prescott appears to think no actions were taken, and that is simply not the case. We did take actions.

You discussed at length the car insurance story. I find it interesting that that was one that Mr Prescott picked up. We did not need the complaint. We ourselves are the executives; we discovered it, thought it was wrong and took it down within six days. I think it featured in the annual report as a serious editorial breach. I don't think you can actually argue the case that the executive did not do anything. I mean, that is simply an unfair account of it.

I think on many of the areas that he spoke about in this letter, which, as you have all heard, was a partial account of what was actually done—all the various, really important discussions we had in our thematic reviews, about the economy, about tax and spend, and about immigration and migration—again, it is not the case that nobody in the BBC knows about this. Andrew Dilnot, who wrote the text, spent a long time after the report going around the newsroom explaining it. Madeleine Sumption did so. We are committed to learning the lessons.

I was partly involved at the beginning of the migration ones; I know a bit about it. I know all the people I spoke to and, like with all these reports, there are things that the BBC journalists do well and there are things they can improve on. There were a number of recommendations. I just think that you must not come away thinking that the EGSC is not a functioning committee. It takes on board issues, digs deep into things and talks about more urgent matters, and the executive, on the whole, responds positively and constructively to it.

Q326 Natasha Irons: I want to come back to the memo and the leaking. Sir Robbie, were you aware that it was going to leak?

Sir Robbie Gibb: Absolutely not. Of course not.

Q327 Natasha Irons: The Serota report, which you worked on, referred consistently to a “culture of defensiveness” at the BBC. Do you think that has changed since then?

Sir Robbie Gibb: I do think it has changed. I know that Tim Davie, the outgoing director general, was very passionate about that and, in relation to the press office, that there had been, I think, a “Computer says no” default position and a circling of the wagons. I genuinely do not think that is the case any more. Of course, people are always naturally defensive when they are being criticised, but I think there has been a cultural change.

I want to say more generally that there was a lot in the Prescott report that I think a lot of people at the BBC management agree with. It was basically copied in large part from the David Grossman report, but it was a snapshot in time, and this is crucial to your point. It is not that it was particularly unrepresentative of the Grossman reports from the time, but a lot has happened since then—we have had the action plan, which we can go through with you. The car insurance one is a very good example; I know he feels very passionate about this particular story. It took quite a while between his original email and when it was eventually properly discussed at EGSC, but once the committee had the full facts in front of it, it took only six days to deal with it, as Samir was saying.

Q328 Natasha Irons: Caroline, do you have anything to say about the defensiveness in the BBC?

Caroline Thomson: I think there is always a natural tendency to want to perhaps not be defensive but support your staff, particularly in journalism, of course, where there are a lot of people taking risks and really working under a lot of pressure. I think among management—having once been a news manager myself—there is a natural tendency to think, “Hold on a minute, I need to protect them.”

Actually, the thing that strikes me—as you may know, I have recently come back to the BBC as a non-executive, having been an executive before, but having had a 15-year gap—is the extraordinary seriousness with which the BBC continually investigates itself, questions itself and reviews its output, with a view to getting higher standards. I think the lack of understanding of that is the thing that most concerns me, because there are endless debates about, “When can you call something genocide and when don’t you?” and “Where did we get it right and where did we get it wrong?”, for example. I think that to characterise a support environment as a defensive environment is to mischaracterise it.

Q329 Natasha Irons: Sir Robbie, you are clearly a man of very strong political convictions and have held multiple posts both at the BBC and then over at No. 10 over the last couple of decades. How have you managed to keep these roles separate and manage your own bias, given that this is all about accusing the BBC of bias and accusing the BBC of not being able to look at its own lines? How do you manage your own?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Robbie Gibb: I was director of communications for the Government for two years, but I was a BBC news producer for 25 years, including being a programme editor and head of BBC Westminster, so I have a long track record. I primarily want to be defined by my commitment to the BBC, not my two years working for Theresa May. When I first joined—I think I joined the BBC in 1991—it was drummed into me about impartiality. It is one of those things, those early impressions, that has basically dominated my thinking and was why I wanted to stick with the BBC. You are told to leave your politics at the door. Impartiality is not just a moral obligation; it is also a legal obligation.

I will tell you one thing that is really important: if you want to find the people who are most critical of journalism when it becomes biased or inaccurate, it is other BBC journalists, because their reputations are damaged by it. There could not be a bigger mismatch between the way I am presented in some quarters in relation to my attitude—I think I have become weaponised in terms of how I am perceived. Everyone who knows me knows that I am hugely impartial. I have friends across the political divide. I have impartiality through my bones, and I have always been a big campaigner.

Q330 **Natasha Irons:** There is a question of perception, isn't there? How do you manage perception? You said it has been weaponised, but I suppose it is difficult for people to separate those things.

Sir Robbie Gibb: Sure. One of the problems with being a non-exec member of the board is that it is very hard to speak for yourself. You get calls from journalists asking for a response, and you just do not want to engage. That is one of the reasons why I am absolutely delighted to come here and have an opportunity to set out my case, where hopefully I can demonstrate that the perception is actually wrong.

Q331 **Cameron Thomas:** Sir Robbie, you talk about leaving your bias at the door. Shortly after you took over at the *Jewish Chronicle*, a second-generation columnist, Jonathan Freedland, resigned, stating that too often the *Jewish Chronicle* "reads like a partisan, ideological instrument, its judgments political rather than journalistic". How does that tally with the statement about leaving politics at the door?

Sir Robbie Gibb: I think you have got your timeline wrong. That particular statement happened after I had left. I left any involvement in the *Jewish Chronicle* in August 2024. There are a number of points I would like to set out here. First, I had no editorial role whatsoever on the *Jewish Chronicle*. It had no bearing whatsoever on my work with the BBC. My relationship with the *Jewish Chronicle* was fully declared.

Chair, perhaps I can take the opportunity to explain why I, a non-Jewish person, ended up being a director of the *Jewish Chronicle*. The *Jewish Chronicle* is the oldest Jewish newspaper in the world—200 years old. It was about to go under through liquidation. I was approached to join a consortium by an elderly Jewish funder—

Cameron Thomas: Can you remember his name?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Robbie Gibb: I will come to that. Philanthropist—that is obviously not his name; it was his role. His involvement in and funding of the *Jewish Chronicle* were conditional on him not becoming a public person. You can see more recently, but even then, that the amount of safety issues are very high indeed. The original plan was for me to be director for two weeks; it ended up being a lot longer than that, because there were complications in how charity law had changed. I was doing a favour. I did not get paid. I had no particular reason to be involved other than that I was asked to do so. I had no involvement editorially whatsoever. For unfortunate reasons I ended up owning it, or being director of it, for much longer than I had anticipated.

Q332 **Cameron Thomas:** What was your role in the establishment of GB News?

Sir Robbie Gibb: After leaving No. 10 and before I joined the board, I was approached to help with the fundraise. I helped with the fundraise, presenting my vision of GB News, which is somewhat different from the way it has turned out, but I never worked for GB News once it became a news channel.

Q333 **Dr Huq:** It is good to see the three of you. I think it is the first time I have met you, Caroline. Samir, I remember meeting you at a party when you were at Juniper. Robbie, I used to have your number. You used to phone me up for “Daily Politics”. We are not as close as we used to be—how sad.

Sir Robbie Gibb: I am very disappointed by that.

Dr Huq: “Daily Politics” was commissioned by Juniper, I think. Was it?

Dr Shah: No, you are confusing it with another programme. When I was running Juniper, I made a programme called “This Week” with Andrew Neil, Michael Portillo and Diane Abbott.

Dr Huq: Right, so you two probably knew each other way back.

Dr Shah: Yes, Robbie Gibb was a commissioning editor on that.

Q334 **Dr Huq:** Yes, the BBC political programme—I remember. We all miss your brother, Robbie. He was a very good schools Minister—very responsive. Whenever we had school issues, we would be up there at the Department. Congratulations on your knighthood too, Sir Robbie. I think that happened since we last spoke, so congratulations on that.

Prior to you taking up the role, your views on the BBC were quite public, in different newspaper articles you wrote. There is the one from August 2020 in *The Telegraph* where you talk about how the BBC needs to get its ship in order. It said, “BBC journalists are increasingly letting their political preferences show” and that any student of impartial and accurate press can see that. It included a bit of an attack on Lewis Goodall. Then there was a *Daily Mail* one about the “Today” programme the same year, where you said it was “Trapped by its own...’groupthink’”. You called it “Radio Misery”, “sneering” and “monstrously out of touch”. Do you think that is still the case? That was 2020. You have been on the board since then. Do you still hold those views of the BBC?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Robbie Gibb: The particular issue around the “Today” programme was, I think, during the 2019 general election. It was unfortunate—I can see how it happened—because they had outside broadcasts in universities and the views expressed were not the views of that story. In that election, the debate was very much in the red wall, and that created a real problem for them. I understand why they did it—they wanted to get younger audiences participating. I do not really see that any more on the “Today” programme. They are taking a lot of their output out of central London and into different parts of the country, which is good.

In terms of revealed preferences, I feel very strongly that you leave your politics at the door. If you take the sum total of people’s tweets—you take the sum total of their output—and you know where they are coming from, that is a problem, because the BBC has to be for everyone. I know lots of BBC journalists’ politics, because I have been around the BBC a long time. There are people very much from the left, but you could not tell for one second.

You mentioned Lewis Goodall. I think Lewis Goodall is a very talented journalist, so much so that I was the person who recruited him into the BBC in the first place, on the basis that he came from the IPPR, he was a talented guy, and I wanted to bring people with a diversity of opinion into the BBC. My issue does not particularly focus on him. I was writing at the time, before I joined the board, about where journalists behave in a way such that the public know where they are coming from—that is a real problem. Another credit to Tim Davie and his management of the BBC was introducing some very clear guidelines for Twitter/X. You do not really see those stories any more. I think the BBC have cracked it.

Q335 **Dr Huq:** We have had people like Andrew Neil—there have always been political appointments, haven’t there? There has been Gavyn Davies and James Purnell. Lewis Goodall is still doing podcasts saying that you made his life hell. Why are people saying this? Why is Emily Maitlis saying that an active Tory party agent is shaping BBC News output? That is cuddly old you.

Sir Robbie Gibb: I do not think it mentions my name in that article, but look—I do not know why people write that. It is not for me to say. Perception is important, but not as important as reality.

Q336 **Dr Huq:** We hear there is a culture of fear. Is that true? We hear that at the all-staff meeting last week, many people felt very dismissed, and that their questions were completely cut. I think, Samir Shah, you said it was disrespectful of them to raise such issues.

Dr Shah: No, I did not say it was disrespectful of them. I was doing an all-staff meeting, and what I was trying to say—

Dr Huq: Sorry—I should have declared an interest. I was a staff member at the BBC in the ’90s—a long time ago—in BBC Western House.

Dr Shah: You mentioned that, Robbie. You mentioned that I ran this programme called “This Week” with Andrew Neil, Michael Portillo and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Diane Abbott, and often Alan Johnson. Every week, I spoke to Robbie; he was the head of that department. Not one week did he ever play any politics. If anything, because of Andrew's and Michael's position, he was keen that the other side, or the Lib Dems, also featured on the sofa. If there was any push, it was always in the other direction because of the politics of those two.

I have absolute faith in Robbie as a journalist. That is my experience of him. Obviously I was not involved in his recruitment to the board, but my experience was over many years. It is unfair to say that Robbie comes with—Robbie is principally a journalist. He was a journalist running the whole BBC's political journalism, and he did that with great skill and great commitment to impartiality. That is my view on it.

The board of the BBC is full of extremely experienced, very good people, and we should respect them. They are giving their time and their work. That is what I was talking about. On the whole, I do not like ad hominem attacks. We should look at what they say and the content of what they say, rather than it being a personal ad hominem point. That is what I was saying. People who know me know that I go around talking to staff. As you know, I have monthly lunches with junior staff to hear from them directly what they think of the BBC. I get a lot of feedback. Staff are absolutely entitled to say what they want to say about me, but in terms of ad hominem attacks, the individuals on my board are good, experienced people who say wise things and challenge, as are the executives. I just want us to respect that.

Q337 Chair: We need to move on, because otherwise we are going to run out of time. Sir Robbie, there has been a lot of speculation in the media, including BBC journalists, who are saying that what happened to the BBC over the last couple of weeks was a board-level orchestrated coup. Can you address that? Do you recognise that characterisation? Was there anything orchestrated about what happened to the BBC over the last couple of weeks—the departure of Tim Davie, and so on?

Sir Robbie Gibb: It is up there as one of the most ridiculous charges. People had to find some angle, but it is complete nonsense. It is also deeply offensive to fellow board members who are, as Samir was saying, people of great standing in different fields. I am not even sure what the charge is, to be honest. It is complete nonsense.

Caroline Thomson: I certainly would not have characterised anything that I saw in the last couple of weeks as a board coup.

Chair: Or any kind of orchestrated, board-level action?

Caroline Thomson: No—endless debate, but nothing orchestrated.

Q338 Natasha Irons: Can I clarify something? Dr Shah, you said that you were not involved in Sir Robbie coming on to the board, but, Sir Robbie, did you have any role in Dr Shah becoming chair?

Sir Robbie Gibb indicated dissent.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Natasha Irons: Okay.

Dr Shah: The chair is a public appointment.

Q339 **Natasha Irons:** Yes, but I was wondering whether there were any conversations. Were your views canvassed in any way? Were you asked your opinion?

Dr Shah: When I applied for it, I knew many people in the BBC because I have worked for it; I have been involved in it. I canvassed many people, including Robbie, on whether they thought it was a good idea to apply for the job. I remember that a very senior BBC exec—I will not say who—said to me, “It is one of those jobs where, if you don’t get it, you might be rather pleased.”

Chair: I bet you’re feeling that way now.

Dr Shah: Well, I knew what he meant.

Q340 **Natasha Irons:** Over the weekend, there were reports of a resignation from the board. Dr Shah, why did Mr Banerji resign from the board?

Dr Shah: I am very pleased that you asked me that question. Let me explain to you Shumeet Banerji’s role on the board. He is one of our non-executive directors. He is a formidable man with a formidable intellect. He has contributed enormously in the four years that he has been on the board. He comes from a management consultancy and internationalist commercial view. He will be leaving the board in four weeks’ time. When his time came up for renewal, in the summer, I had a discussion with him, saying that the skills I was looking for over the next few years, especially regarding the charter and funding, were different from the ones that he possessed. We would come to an agreement that for four years he had contributed extremely well to the BBC debate, but I would be looking for someone else. Right now, that process of recruiting a new member is under way. I looked last week at the shortlist—a remarkably good, strong shortlist. Caroline is part of this because she is part of the nominations committee, which I chair and will do the recruitment. I was heartened by that.

So Shumeet was going to leave. Then the letter came—the private letter. The one thing I would say is that what has been picked up is that he was not consulted that weekend, when the resignations of our two most senior people were in discussion. I looked back because my memory was that he was. I can tell the Select Committee that at 12.47 on that Sunday, I had a 26-minute call with Mr Banerji. That was the weekend in which these things were discussed. I was responding to a request from Tim Davie because this was a very difficult moment. I said that it was not a matter of a formal call to the board to discuss whether one of its executives should or should not be there.

However, because of the seriousness of the events of that weekend, which led to the resignation of two very senior people—this is a very big event—you would expect a good chair to discuss that with all the NEDs, as I did,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

over that Saturday and Sunday to hear what they had to say. Included in that discussion was, as I said, a 26-minute call to Mr Banerji. Because of the miracles of smartphone technology, I can scroll back and see that. I am both disappointed and surprised by what he had to say. He has a few weeks to run. All I can say is that I am disappointed.

Q341 Natasha Irons: If he only has a few weeks to go, to leave now feels like a bit of a statement in itself—the timing of it. It has been reported that he has given governance issues at the top of the BBC as one of the reasons why he decided to leave. Was there any more detail?

Dr Shah: It was a private letter to the board, so I will keep that privacy. But it was leaked in some way because one word came out. I would simply say that he was consulted.

Q342 Natasha Irons: Would we as a Committee be able to see that letter—privately, maybe?

Dr Shah: Can I take away that question? Obviously, I want to be open and frank with all of you, but it is a private letter. Let me reflect on that and decide how to deal with it.

Q343 Natasha Irons: There are reports today, I believe in *The i*, about a second board member who was on the verge of quitting. There have also been reports of the role of the EGSC expanding and the creation of a new deputy director general role. Dr Shah, is not that a bit of an admission that perhaps your leadership in this needs to be looked at as well, in terms of whether you are able to get a grip of what is happening on the board and whether it is all working the way it should?

Dr Shah: You have asked a number of questions there. On the business of the EGSC and how it should change, I have asked Caroline to do that; she can speak to the action she is taking and the answers that she will come up with for the board meeting in December.

On your last point, no, I do not think that is right. I think that right now my job is to steer this ship out of these choppy waters and on to an even keel. The most important job I have right now is to recruit a director general. That is far and away the most important thing that I need to do.

Caroline Thomson: I am a senior independent director, so one of my jobs, obviously, is to liaise with the other non-exec directors. I should tell you that Samir has the unanimous support of the board. That was established at the beginning of what you might call the current crisis about a week ago, and it was repeated on Friday night. We are very lucky to have him as chairman.

Natasha Irons: But there are issues here, aren't there? We are looking now at how this all works and it has taken quite some time to get there. That is why I asked the question.

Caroline Thomson: Of course. It is completely the right question to ask.

Q344 Natasha Irons: Where do we go from here? What are the next steps for the board?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Shah: We are united on the steps that need to be taken. Let me put them in three categories. First, we need to examine the editorial failures and take action. Part of that is to do with examining, and we already know one outcome of that, which I think is very serious, and that is the resignation of our head of news. I repeat, that was important and the right thing to do—she took responsibility.

On the governance issue, at the heart of which is the EGSC, Caroline will be coming back to the board with answers. Specifically on the memo that Mr Prescott wrote, Peter Johnston, our head of complaints, will be looking in detail at every single point, asking whether the actions we or management have taken are good enough, and whether more actions are needed. That will all come back.

At the same time, with my nominations committee and the board, I will have to secure a new director general.

Q345 **Chair:** Can I ask you a quick question, Dr Shah? In answer to Natasha, you suggested that that letter from Dr Banerji may have leaked. We also know that the memo leaked. You have a bit of a problem with leaks in the BBC at the moment. Do you know how the letter, and more specifically the memo, found their way to *The Telegraph*? Have you managed to get to the bottom of that?

Dr Shah: I have instituted a leak inquiry. We are a journalistic operation and it does not surprise me that we leak, but these were two very serious leaks. As you heard from Mr Prescott, he had no intention for the memo to go out. I do not believe that Mr Banerji did with his note—he also did not expect to make the news, if I quote him properly. But I think we should have a leak inquiry, and I have initiated that.

Q346 **Chair:** Caroline Thomson, are you a faithful or a traitor?

Caroline Thomson: There was a wry smile from me, because at one level, you could say that this is a test of what very good journalists we employ, that they manage to get the stories.

Q347 **Liz Jarvis:** Sir Robbie, do you agree with Deborah Turness's statement that recent allegations that the BBC "is institutionally biased are wrong"?

Sir Robbie Gibb: I do agree with her, yes. If I may expand, if that is okay, the reason I would never use that is that it implies that all BBC journalists are biased, which I absolutely do not believe. We could trot through some: Gary O'Donoghue's fantastic reporting of the attempted assassination of Donald Trump, fantastic; Quentin Sommerville; and the unsung hero of covering politics, Chris Mason—they are absolutely first rate. Anything that impedes their impartiality would be wrong.

It is also worth noting with regard to Michael Prescott's memo that there was nothing on BBC Westminster or Millbank, nothing on BBC Northern Ireland. There was a reason for that, because those particular areas—and others—are centres of excellence. They have a lot of scrutiny on a daily basis. They can make mistakes—we all make mistakes—but they correct them very quickly. The reason I agree with Deborah on that is that we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have some underlying issues in some areas, which the BBC have held their hands up to and are addressing, but to tar the entire BBC with that brush would be completely inappropriate.

Q348 Liz Jarvis: Were you sorry that Deborah resigned?

Sir Robbie Gibb: I was disappointed that we ended up in this situation, that she ended up resigning, but as a non-exec member, it is not for me to comment on exec members of Tim's team.

Q349 Liz Jarvis: There have been three resignations in the fallout from the publication of the dossier. There is an argument that if you are a journalist, and a journalist for over 25 years, the last thing that you want is to become the story. Given the reports of your attempts to shape editorial judgments and the persistent questions about whether your political views have influenced BBC decision making, how can the public maintain trust in the BBC's impartiality under your oversight? In light of these conflicts, have you considered resigning?

Sir Robbie Gibb: There is a lot in that question; I will be as brief as I can. I am a non-exec director. I have no involvement in pre-broadcast content and no involvement—rightly so—in operational matters. There have been lots of stories that are just completely untrue about me in relation to influencing the day-to-day output. In Tim Davie's leaving note, he talked about these issues being weaponised by people. I think he was particularly referring to people that have latched on to the issues in the Prescott memo—the errors—and are using it to bash the BBC, often people who do not agree with the BBC for a whole range of ideological reasons.

It has also been politicised the other way, as a way to have a pop at me and my role, as if I am not legitimate. On the response to the memo, most people who are critical want the BBC to do better. I think that that has been weaponised and I have been a victim of that weaponisation. But broadly speaking, most people want the BBC to do well, to park those two particular extremes. So, in answer to your question, no, I have not done anything wrong. I am a passionate defender of the BBC. I am a passionate defender of its values and the licence fee. I was involved in a minor way in helping James Purnell in the last charter renewal. Everything I have done throughout my entire time at the BBC has been to help and promote the BBC.

Q350 Liz Jarvis: So you have no intention of resigning.

Sir Robbie Gibb: Correct.

Q351 Liz Jarvis: Dr Shah, as we just heard, Tim Davie said of the BBC: "We should champion it, not weaponise it." Do you feel the BBC is being weaponised?

Dr Shah: I have been involved in the BBC for many decades. I used to work for the BBC when I ran the current affairs department. Then I was on the board and then I made programmes for it. Whenever the BBC makes a mistake—I think Jeff Smith asked the question—I do not think it is enough to say that 99% of the time we get it right. When we make a mistake, it is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

an important thing. We need to identify the problem and take the correct actions. It is not enough to say, "Well, everything else is great." It is important you hold it up to high standards.

But when we do make a mistake, what tends to happen and has happened over the years is that people who want to have a go at the BBC use it to have a go at the BBC. I said at the beginning that I apologise to the people who care deeply for the BBC and want it to survive and thrive—most people do. When a situation such as this arises, there is a kind of firestorm and people use it as a way of criticising the BBC for the mistake they made. We have always made mistakes and the right thing to do is to own up to it, fix it, and, to your point, Chair, act quickly.

One of the things I am going to learn from these three weeks is that we need to find out and examine why it takes so long. I do not think there is any malice in its taking a long time, and I do not think it is about a sclerotic organisation, but we do need to understand why it takes so long and try to fix that as well. That is important because the longer it takes, the more it becomes a political football to be kicked around. It is, to me, one of the lessons of editorial governance. Then there is the issue of speed of response. It is an important thing. It matters that we are quicker and get on the front foot.

Q352 Chair: Dr Shah, your colleague Sir Robbie has come in for quite a lot of stick in the media, as you are probably aware, for wielding his right-wing bias to influence the board. Recent YouGov figures show that 31% of people think the BBC is biased in favour of left-wing views, compared to 19% who think it is biased in favour of right-wing views, and the number that think it is in favour of left-wing views is going up. So if he is wielding his right-wing bias, he is not doing it very well. But leave that to one side. What is your view? Is Sir Robbie overly politically biased in his discussions?

Dr Shah: No, he is not. My account of my dealings with Robbie when he was my commissioning editor is that he is interested in impartiality and accuracy. When he brings something to the table, and he feels very strongly about it, look at the substance of the stories and the issues he raises. The substance of it is about being accurate and fair. It is not often discussed, and maybe Sir Robbie will talk about it himself, but there was an issue about a rail strike. Robbie, why don't you explain that?

Sir Robbie Gibb: I am conscious of the perception of my bias. I am always on the lookout for biases the other way, to make sure that I can demonstrate what I say. I saw a story before last Christmas about a train strike. It was by a regional journalist, and the whole notion of the story was how inconvenient it was to passengers, and it was very dismissive, verging on the critical, of the union striking. I spotted this. It clearly, from my perspective, lacked the union voice, either in tracking or in clip. I raised it, sent it to the head of BBC England and copied in the EGSC. It was agreed that that was the case, the journalist was spoken to and he totally agreed. That was good.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q353 **Chair:** Are you responsible, then, for the fact that YouGov found that 31% of people feel that the BBC is biased in favour of left-wing views?

Sir Robbie Gibb: This is the thing. I know that it is hard to marry the fact that I spent two years as a director of communications for the Government—not the Conservatives; the Government—and my genuine passion for impartiality. I want to hear the full range of views. I mentioned the recruiting of Lewis Goodall. I do not want the BBC to be partisan or to favour any particular way. When you tune in, I want you to know what is happening.

Dr Shah: Let me answer that question. I do not think that the way we address our issues is helpfully characterised as being left-wing or right-wing. We examine things. For example—this was not mentioned—we cover business coverage, or the migration report. We find there are issues, and we are strong in some cases and we need to get better in others. The question is about whether we are impartial. Are we covering all sides of the argument? Are we making sure that we are not showing any revealed preferences? That is what it is about.

I just do not think of it as, “Is this a left-wing position?” For example, take our discussion, which is very important in this timeframe, from January to May. Every five years, the BBC reviews its editorial guidelines. It is the most important document we have. It came to the EGSC for rigorous examination. It then goes, as is the normal process, to the board. We did that with great care, and people discussed it. We even discussed our position on the use of the word “terrorist”. It is not just a simple, “Let’s pass it”; these are really important questions. The issues were debated. It was, again, a very strong, very helpful and very constructive debate. That is how it works. I like differences of opinion; I like diversity of opinion. The worst thing for us is to have groupthink. We want to challenge; that is what is important. It is important that we have points of view representing, frankly, the country as a whole.

Q354 **Dr Huq:** I don’t think it is just the two years at the Conservative party though, is it? Did you not work on the Portillo leadership campaign? What is interesting is that you have gone in and out, in and out, back and forth, whereas other people usually make the break, and go to one or the other.

Sir Robbie Gibb: I have spent 25 years at the BBC; that is the important thing. I have been defined by these two years at No. 10. I have worked for the Conservative party, many years ago.

Dr Huq: You also ran the Portillo campaign, and you worked for Francis Maude, so it is not just two isolated years.

Sir Robbie Gibb: For clarity, I was talking about how I have been defined. I am not saying that I have not had any other political involvement in my history. I am 61, so there is a lot of time to fill.

Q355 **Dr Huq:** The EGSC has got a few holes in it now because of these resignations, right?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Shah: Mr Banerji was not a member of the EGSC; he was a member of the board, and there is no hole there, because—

Dr Huq: But Tim Davie and Deborah Turness were, weren't they?

Dr Shah: That will, of course, be part of Caroline's examination of the composition of the EGSC, so maybe she would like to speak to that.

Caroline Thomson: For the moment, Tim Davie is still director general, so he would still be a member of the EGSC and come to the meetings. Jonathan Munro is the acting director of news, so he will come in as a replacement for Deborah. So we don't have holes at the moment. The chairman has asked me to do a root-and-branch review of the EGSC, which I am doing at speed and at pace at the moment. One of the things we will look at is the membership.

Q356 **Dr Huq:** It does seem a very small number of people to be the arbiter of editorial standards, including someone who is known for their Conservative past and for being a bit partisan.

I have seen the minutes of 6 March 2025, and there is an agenda item that deals with the BBC Arabic issue, so I do agree with what you said, Samir, in your letter: some of the things in the Prescott memo were dealt with, including BBC Arabic, so I don't know why they are still in there, making hay. However, it refers to a plan for Reform voters. There is a whole item about how trust needs to be built with the Reform electorate. Is there not going to be something similar planned for Green voters, which are going up in the opinion polls as well? It seems very slanted. When you look at panel shows, there always seems to be Zia Yusuf or Nigel Farage on there. This is a party with four MPs. Why is there a plan for Reform voters?

Sir Robbie Gibb: There are two issues, both of great interest. At that particular meeting, Deborah Turness did a presentation on party support for the BBC, and there was a discussion—there were a number of things. Labour are very supportive. Then there was concern about why Reform voters have a hostility to the BBC. She had various thoughts. It was absolutely not about doing stories that are favourable to Reform—I see that is how it could come across. One of her ideas was having more light discussion programmes. So that is what that is about. *[Interruption.]* You look sceptical.

The second issue is something very close to my heart: the allocation of airtime to different political parties. There is a general metric for doing that, which is that you look at past and present levels of support over two electoral cycles for making a judgment. The particular problem at the moment, of course, is that you have, for example, Reform leading in the polls, but very few seats; you have the Liberal Democrats further down the polls, with many more seats; you have the Greens, as you have pointed out, second in some polls; you have the Government on a much lower percentage, but they are the Government; and you have the official Opposition, struggling on less than 20%, but still the official Opposition.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The exec are massively alert to this and we have updates at every EGSC on this very subject.

Dr Shah: May I answer? Let me step back a bit. One of the jobs of the BBC and its news division is to reflect the points of view across the country—that we are properly impartial, and we hear that.

In establishing where we may be weak or where we may be strong, we do a lot of research. We do a lot of research on various demographics. For example, we need to make sure that levels of trust are just as high among young people as among old people. This is normal business. We look at how the country responds on trust in the BBC—

Dr Huq: But why just the Reform voters?

Dr Shah: What we discovered when we did the political analysis—it is one among lots of things; we do demographic analysis, we do geographic analysis. One of the things about geography, which I am very exercised by, is that support for the BBC declines as you go further north. This is a very big issue for the BBC. We are across the country. One of my strategic priorities is—we moved programmes and production out, and we need to move power out of London, and that will help establish better trust as we go further north. It is not surprising that the news division—

Dr Huq: I think it is surprising to the millions of licence fee payers that Reform seems to be on so frequently. There is a plan for Reform voters; there does not seem to be a plan for other parties that are rising.

Dr Shah: We have a plan for how to reach young people, and how we do that. That is not just about content; it is also about the platforms.

Q357 **Dr Huq:** To go over some of the points I asked Michael Prescott, to get the other side of it, was there any discussion of the dossier with him before, or even the appointment, at all?

Sir Robbie Gibb: Are you talking to me?

Dr Huq: Yes, with yourself, because you are friends—we have established that.

Sir Robbie Gibb: I don't think I had any conversation. I know him, and I have got to know him a lot better since he has joined, but there was no conversation with him prior to his appointment. The only contact I have had with him; I have not met him in person since the—

Dr Huq: In the run-up to the job? I think I asked him about the run-up to being appointed and since the dossier.

Sir Robbie Gibb: Nothing in the run-up to the job at all. It is quite a long time ago, but I am 99% certain that there was no contact. In relation to the dossier, coincidentally I phoned him about a week prior to him sending that. I was just checking in while I was walking along because I had not seen or spoken to him since. He told me that he was thinking of sending a note to Samir, as chair, about his concerns about his time on the EGSC



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and asked whether I think that was a good idea. I thought, well, if you want to do that, that is fair enough.

I think I then phoned you, Samir, and mentioned this to you, if you recall, to check it had arrived. The next thing I found was this whole dossier in my inbox as a member of the board. So something happened between him saying to me he was thinking of writing to Samir, as chair, and him deciding to send to the whole board.

Q358 Dr Huq: On some of the things in there, such as the Gaza coverage, it would have surprised many that he saw the BBC position as he did. Tim Davie, in that chair, used to always say, "We get complaints from both sides". Has the EGSC ever considered the Centre for Media Monitoring report? That was a 188-page systematic look at every mention of Gaza. I think they found that one IDF death amounted to many thousands of Gazan deaths. Mr Prescott's thing seems so partial and I do not think he really allayed that fear that it was all from one perspective. Would the EGSC ever consider left-wing-type perspectives?

Sir Robbie Gibb: We have never looked at other people's reports in that sense; what we do is look at particular concerns about accuracy, particularly.

Dr Huq: Or on child poverty, or climate change? Any of these issues.

Sir Robbie Gibb: You have raised the issue, which I was interested in, of dehumanisation; the dehumanising way in which language was used, I think I am right in saying, about Palestinian casualties and issues around the reporting of how we described Benjamin Netanyahu. I think that is interesting.

In terms of the language used for the Palestinian casualties, I am not unsympathetic to what you are saying. There is a type of research called sentiment analysis, which uses AI to make a proper assessment. That is definitely the kind of thing I would like to see us digging quite deeply into when we do the thematic review into the middle east.

The trouble with that type of analysis is that it is not very well respected or regarded. It is much easier and more pressing to do things about accuracy where you can really nail it. Don't get me wrong—I am sympathetic to you in relation to those concerns being addressed.

Dr Huq: I would say listen to your staff more—all those all-staff meetings and those letters with 400 signatories—not just one person every time.

Q359 Damian Hinds: Dr Shah, a few moments ago you came back to what I think is a central issue, which is the speed of response. I am old enough to remember 2007, before your time leading the organisation, when the BBC was in hot water over the misnaming of a kitten. You do get held to a higher standard. That comes with the privilege of the licence fee. On that occasion, it also took over a year, and a leak, for it to come out. It is all very well to say, "We must just do better at coming out faster", but what is going to make the BBC face up and fess up faster?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Shah: That is such an important question. I understand the scepticism that it always seems to take time. I do not know the answer to your question, but I am heartened by a parallel area that I was involved in and I took very great care to accept: what we call a culture review.

In my first year, I was determined to tackle abuses of power, and there was a lot of scepticism: "Oh, we do this year in, year out. It always happens." There was some scepticism, but in the event, we did a very strong review. Earlier this year, I and the board came out—but I took a personal ownership of trying to get this right—in the face of scepticism, and I would say that the executive responded extremely well. There is a very serious set of actions that are in place now to tackle it.

Damian Hinds: I am going to have to rush you, Dr Shah.

Dr Shah: Equally, once I focus on it, I will say, "What is the problem here? Why do we not come out more quickly? What is it that stops us and how can we fix it?" That is absolutely going to be one of the lessons I have learned from these three weeks. I hear your scepticism because I remember the kitten story.

Damian Hinds: It was Socks and Cookie, in case you are interested.

Dr Shah: I think it is a constant problem for the BBC that we do respond in a way that always puts us on the back foot, and I do not like that. I want us to be on the front foot and to get out our statements clearly. If we made a mistake, hold our hands up fast. If we do not think it is a mistake, say that.

Q360 **Damian Hinds:** Let us return to the backward-looking thing and what is in the Prescott memo. The board is committed to revisit everything that is in that memo and to report back your conclusions on those items transparently. What does that mean in practice, and what is the transparency we should be looking out for?

Dr Shah: What I have asked Peter Johnston to do is to examine every single story and set out what actions the executive has taken to deal with that and then analyse whether those actions are adequate and whether more actions need to be taken. It will be very precise with every single point. It may be that we find—for example, in my view, about the insurance thing—that action was taken and that is it and we do not need to do any more. But there may be others where Peter Johnston may think, "Well, actions A, B and C were taken, but we now need to do D and E as well." It is going to be very precise.

Q361 **Damian Hinds:** Earlier this afternoon Mr Prescott said to us that you should treat all the issues he has raised as systemic unless and until they are demonstrated to be otherwise. Do you think that is a correct way to go about that analysis that you are talking about?

Dr Shah: I should say that I am not clear what Mr Prescott means by the word "systemic".



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Damian Hinds: He is not here for me to put words in his mouth at present, but I think what he means is that, rather than saying, “It was a one-off. Something went wrong on that Tuesday in March, and somebody made an error”, there is something in the organisation, whether in the culture, the systems or the processes. I think that is probably what he means by “systemic”.

Dr Shah: Let me talk about how I read those series of points that Mr Prescott made

Chair: Can you do it concisely?

Dr Shah: Yes. I think there were some individual errors, but I also think it points to some underlying problems. That is how I would describe them. For example, an underlying problem in the Arabic service—

Damian Hinds: Forgive me, but the question is: do you think it is a reasonable approach to this exercise that is about to be undertaken to start with the assumption that for each of those items, it may have been systemic and you have to demonstrate that it is not?

Dr Shah: I would not frame it in that way. I would ask Peter Johnston—he is a very fine, very seasoned and experienced journalist—to look at each one on its own merits, examine them and come to the board with an analysis of whether it is an individual error, an underlying problem error or a systemic error.

Q362 **Damian Hinds:** Sir Robbie, what role do you think the BBC should play in the future? What role should it play in the next 10 years, which may be the same or different from in the past 10, 20 or 30 years?

Sir Robbie Gibb: That is a nice, open question. One of the things I do agree with Michael Prescott on is the potential for the BBC. In the world of totally divisive channels—from Fox to all the rest of it—and the internet, we have a brand and a DNA that could lead the way not just in the UK but globally. That is the thing I find most exciting. We have still got a huge opportunity to do that. I think that we could do that in 10 years.

Q363 **Mr Alaba:** On that last point, in the previous panel, Michael Prescott mentioned that he called you regarding the memo and ran it by you, effectively.

Sir Robbie Gibb: No, I called him a week prior—so it was not that way round—just checking in, because I had not spoken to him since he had left. In that, he said he was thinking about—or had done; I cannot quite remember—messaging the chairman. There was not anything else about the memo.

Mr Alaba: Did you feel, given the fact that he checked in, that he felt it could be damaging to the organisation?

Sir Robbie Gibb: No, he didn’t check—I phoned him and he said he was thinking of sending a memo.

Mr Alaba: You phoned him, but he brought up the issue that he was going to send it.

Sir Robbie Gibb: Yes, because our primary connection was via the EGSC. He must have just been writing his memo then. That is all I can assume. It was a very fleeting—

Mr Alaba: But when you called him, did you know he was going to be preparing this memo?

Sir Robbie Gibb: No, not at all. I phoned him to check in. I had not spoken to him since he had left the EGSC as an adviser. He must have just crossed my mind.

Q364 **Mr Alaba:** So he brought it up. I say this because there is an element of perception, which the Chair was talking about earlier. Imagine if Sir Keir Starmer recruited Alastair Campbell. There is a perception that is important here, and that is why we are asking some of the questions we are asking.

Sir Robbie Gibb: I totally get that, and I hope I was making the distinction. First, I was never as good a communications person as Alastair Campbell, and I only did it for two years.

Mr Alaba: That was good.

Sir Robbie Gibb: But unlike him, I did 25 years as a BBC journalist, so my whole DNA is very different from his. I am an impartial BBC journalist, not a spin doctor by nature.

Q365 **Mr Alaba:** Has the experience of Mr Prescott's memo—he felt the EGSC was not acting so he escalated to the BBC board—altered your thinking on how the EGSC interacts with the board? What do you want the Saul review to achieve?

Caroline Thomson: For the review I am doing, I have been given carte blanche by the chairman to look, root and branch, at how the EGSC is operating. The EGSC, as it currently operates, has many strengths—you have heard us mention, for example, that the thematic reviews have been really useful—but it has perhaps turned into a bit too much of a debating chamber. There probably needs to be something more akin to an audit function—something that is more into tracking actions. I think that point will resonate with some of the conversations we have been having with you today. Looking at the organiser of it, should they have a dotted line to the non-exec chair, so you have a line of accountability there?

The other thing that would resonate with what we have been discussing this afternoon is the way that the EGSC reports to the main board. One of the conclusions we are reaching is that, for example, on the Arabic service, one of the problems was that a lot of action was taken but no one communicated the action, so the EGSC did not know and the board did not know. Tracking actions properly, so that we can check that they have happened and to make sure that everyone knows that they have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

happened and can see the results, is one of the important things we will probably do.

Q366 Mr Alaba: Dr Shah, the EGSC used to be chaired by Nicholas Serota, who was the senior independent director. Why is the chair of the BBC board chairing the EGSC?

Dr Shah: The issue of whether I, as chair of the board, should also chair the EGSC is one that I would like Caroline to examine. As I said, nothing is off the table here. It is important to get this right, and I am perfectly happy to take whatever recommendations she makes to the board, and the board's outcomes as recommendations—and being the chair of the EGSC will be part of that.

Q367 Mr Alaba: You have mentioned that you are looking to change the composition of the EGSC as well. What will it look like?

Caroline Thomson: It will still have a mix of execs and non-exec, I think. I should say that I am speculating to you before I have been to the board with the conclusions, so this is subject to the board agreeing them. I think it should have a broad representation of views from within that, as far as possible. We should still have independent advisers, but we might look at the role and how we define the job descriptions of the independent advisers. The contracts of the two independent advisers you have seen today have already finished, so we need to reappoint them.

Q368 Mr Alaba: Dr Shah, were board members excluded from conversations on the director general going?

Dr Shah: I do not exclude board members. You are talking about that weekend. I spent the weekend talking to every single NED about the situation, and I wanted to hear what they had to say. When we had a board meeting late on the Sunday afternoon, the director of news had resigned and the director general had resigned, so we did not have a board meeting to discuss—well, first of all, it is not a matter for the board to discuss whether or not an executive working for the director general goes; it is a matter for the director general.

Q369 Mr Alaba: Just before you carry on with your answer, I asked that because, as the chair, you have a strong relationship with the director general, so there is an element of protecting and supporting the director general. What I am trying to get at is what happened there in terms of the protection of a very strong relationship. That obviously failed.

Dr Shah: Yes. Let me repeat that I think that Tim Davie has done an outstanding job as director general, and I am very sorry to lose him. Let me be clear about that. It is not just me; I know, because I have spoken to them all one-to-one, that he had the full confidence of the board and they wanted him to continue, no question. Tim knew that. In his resignation, you will see his reasons for resigning, but I will make it absolutely clear that neither I, as chair, nor the board wanted him to go. He had our full confidence, and we would have liked him to stay.

Q370 Mr Alaba: With him going, did you think about your position?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Shah: My job now is to steady the ship and put it on an even keel. I am not somebody who walks away from a problem. I think my job is now to fix it, and that is what I am doing. I want to lead the organisation in such a way as to address and fix the issues we have raised, which are editorial governance and speed, and to lead what is really important here: the search for a new director general.

Q371 **Chair:** Dr Shah, there has been a lot of discussion all across the media over the last couple of weeks as to whether the job of a DG is just too big for one person to do, and whether that role should be split. You will have seen that we spoke to Michael and Caroline before you; they both thought that it was and that it should be split, but they had different views about how that should happen. Michael thought that it should be an editor-in-chief alongside a chief executive in a business sense, if you like, whereas Caroline—the other Caroline—thought that there should be a director general and then a deputy director general, which is what *The Guardian's* reporting has suggested might happen. Do you have a preference? Do you think the job is too big for one person? Should it be split? How should it be split?

Dr Shah: That is a very important question. In my view, it is too big for one person. My view is that, as we search for the new director general, I should make it clear, and the noms committee should make it clear, that there should be a deputy director general who is laser-focused on journalism. Journalism is the most important thing and our greatest vulnerability.

I remember, when I first started as head of current affairs—I think this was mentioned earlier—John Birt was deputy director general, and his focus was journalism, but that did not mean that the DG was not editor-in-chief. As was mentioned, more recently, Mark Thompson was director general and was also editor-in-chief. Even though Mark Thompson was a journalist by trade, he still felt the need to have a deputy director general, Mark Byford, in charge of journalism.

That was then. Now, it seems to me that that is even more important, because the nature of news has changed. As Robbie mentioned, this is an opportunity. The BBC needs to be the beacon of impartial journalism. It absolutely does. We are living in a world where, over the next 10 years, people need to trust us, and we need to have a focus that our journalism is good. I think it needs that. I am inclined to restructure the executive in the future, once we have a new director general, so that the lens through which we examine potential candidates for director general includes the idea that there will be a deputy director general who will be focused on journalism.

Q372 **Damian Hinds:** With a director general and a deputy director general, the hierarchy could not be clearer. Did you think about doing it a different way and having a chief executive who runs the organisation and an editor-in-chief, or whatever you call them, who is ultimately accountable for content, and they both report into the board?

Dr Shah: That is an interesting observation, but the charter at the moment does not allow that.

Damian Hinds: Well, it is going to be renewed quite soon, Dr Shah.

Dr Shah: As I said, this is a good moment for discussion, but right now I have to replace the director general, and I have to do that within the terms of the charter—the charter allows that. Your point is worth raising, and, as with many issues, we will be talking about the charter; there are many factors about the charter that we need to discuss and engage in. We need to start that conversation straightaway.

Q373 **Damian Hinds:** Well, here you are in Parliament; this is an opportunity to express your views in any way you like. You are constrained by the current charter. Were you unconstrained, would you take a different view?

Dr Shah: Right now, my view—I recall that the Chair would like me to take a position—is that the idea of a DG and a DDG has worked well, and I can see it working again. I will need to be persuaded that the alternative is a better solution.

Q374 **Jeff Smith:** That is the executive; can we talk briefly about the board? What do you want to do about changing the composition of the board? In particular, would you want to change the number of non-exec board members?

Dr Shah: Again, that is a matter for the charter. I have already said that I am looking forward to some constitutional innovation. By that I mean that I think we do need to take a look at the composition of the board, the flexibility there is in the nature of public appointments, how many public appointments there are—all of it should be a matter for discussion.

Q375 **Jeff Smith:** Do you have a view?

Dr Shah: I do have a view. As the chair, I would like to have greater flexibility. At the moment I have 10 non-execs and four execs—14. That is it; it is rigid. Given the state of the way the world is changing and the kinds of skills and experiences we need on the board, I would like greater flexibility to reshape the board to make it better able and to have the experiences to meet the world that is coming forward. We talked earlier about the impact of AI on journalism and the whole point of AI. If it is important now, can you imagine how important it will be in five years' time? If I find that the board does not have enough expertise in that area, I would like to be able to change that.

Q376 **Jeff Smith:** Do you think it is important to have political appointees to the board? Is it right? That is for all three of you.

Dr Shah: Let me be clear: they are public appointments, not political appointments. It is a process: you apply—

Jeff Smith: Appointed by politicians.

Dr Shah: I think we should look at this. For me, the issue here is independence versus accountability. We need to be independent, but it is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

also important that we are accountable to the public, Parliament and the nations. The four public appointments are to the four nations. It is important that the nations are represented on the board of the BBC. We can discuss how that mechanic works, and we should make it clear.

Q377 Jeff Smith: Could the contributions be provided by somebody with journalistic experience, not appointed by the Government?

Dr Shah: For the nations?

Jeff Smith: Yes.

Dr Shah: I have given you my point about the executive and the deputy director general. Journalism is a good skill to have, but there are many skills—the BBC is a very big organisation and does many things. Journalism is a very important part of it, and my vision is that the DDG, who would be on the board, would be focused on that. With the 10 non-executives, it needs to be accountable as well as independent, so I do see a role for people who represent the nations, because that is part of it, but we can discuss how that happens. As you know, I have left out the other public appointment: the chair. I think the chair should be in that mix as well.

Q378 Chair: When you appeared in front of our predecessor Committee at your pre-appointment hearing, you were asked whether you felt it was acceptable that members of your board should be permitted to be members of a political party. At that point, you were not able to give us a definite answer—you were not sure. Do you know now?

Dr Shah: The answer is that you can be a member of a political party. As it happens, Sir Robbie was not and is not. We have had many people in the chair who were members; sometimes politicians are, and they are members of parties. The real thing is to have diversity of opinion, for party politics to be left out, and for us to examine the point of the board.

Q379 Dr Huq: If we are reforming the board, is there not an argument for having staff appointments? If you look at AFP in France and NPR, a number of the positions are reserved for staff. Robbie, you have done journalism, but the current board looks like it could be the Post Office board: there are lots of people from business. Some of those people who have made hard decisions, maybe even foreign correspondents who have had to make quick decisions when people are trying to weaponise things, would be good on your board—some actual staff. What do you think?

Dr Shah: You make a very good point. I was hoping—because of events, I have not been able to—to make a speech about the BBC and its accountability, and how we can make it more accountable. We have mechanisms to be accountable to Parliament, like this, and to the Government of the day, but I am concerned about how accountable we are to the public and the licence fee payer. Part of that accountability is, again, to do with the membership of the main board.

Q380 Vicky Foxcroft: We all know that staff morale is really important. How does the board assess current levels of staff confidence in the BBC



HOUSE OF COMMONS

leadership, given leadership transitions and the charter review? Do we know when the charter renewal might take place? Will it potentially have to wait until the director general is appointed?

Dr Shah: To your last question, no. What is happening is that we are waiting, and we expect the publication of the Green Paper to be imminent. The Green Paper will be the Government's attempt to secure consultation. In the Green Paper and in the White Paper, which will be the outcome of what they are planning to do, we will be in heavy conversation and discussion about the charter, the purpose of the BBC, the way it is regulated, the composition of the board—all the issues—as well as, fundamentally, what the mission is. We will also have a parallel discussion about how we fund that; the funding model will be another major part. That will continue. Tim Davie is the director general of the BBC, and he is helping us through that. He will continue to do that. That cannot be paused while we await the arrival of a new director general. This is a matter of some urgency. We are in debate; we will discuss it.

On the matter of staff morale, I think this is very important. We continuously measure staff morale. We have a very detailed look, and we are always looking at it. As I said right at the beginning, I deeply regret the recent events, and of course they have an impact on thousands of people. We will be measuring that and trying to make sure that we include them as we develop our arguments.

Q381 **Vicky Foxcroft:** What is the thing for measuring staff morale?

Dr Shah: The metric for measuring it?

Vicky Foxcroft: How do you do it? What happens to measure it?

Dr Shah: We have effectively what you would call a staff survey, and it is reported every year in our annual report. We do a comprehensive staff survey, with all sorts of different parts. We can break it down and see where morale is—and not just morale, but loads of other factors. If you would like, I can send you the detail of how we measure, in a systematic, comprehensive way, how staff are thinking. I also talk to staff; I have regular lunches with them, so I get a more anecdotal approach to it. It is important that I actually meet staff and see them face to face, so they are not just numbers on a sheet. But we do have numbers on a sheet, and we do it very comprehensively and report it in the annual report.

Q382 **Vicky Foxcroft:** The question was about their confidence in the BBC leadership. Is that one of your questions in the survey?

Dr Shah: It is, yes. I am sorry, I didn't make that clear. Everything is asked.

Q383 **Chair:** Penultimately, on staff morale, in 2023 the BBC had eight equal pay cases open; last year, our predecessor Committee was told that there were 11, so it went up between 2023 and 2024. Do you know how many there are now?

Dr Shah: I do not, but I can get you the figures.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: If I was to tell you that I had heard that there were 40 equal pay cases—

Dr Shah: Forty?

Chair: Yes. That is what has been reported to us. I would be very grateful if you could look into that and come back to us.

Dr Shah: I will look into that and find out the reason for that increase.

Chair: If, in fact, that figure is correct.

Dr Shah: If that is the figure, yes.

Q384 **Chair:** Thank you. Finally, the BBC shared in confidence with us the initial response to Mr Prescott's memo by Peter Johnston, which the board commissioned. Did you consider publishing that?

Dr Shah: I did not consider publishing it. It was important for me when the board discussed Mr Prescott's memo that they had a full and rounded picture of what took place over the three years. You have challenged Mr Prescott on his selection. I thought it was important that when the board discussed it, they had a proper picture of all the different things we considered and the actions we took.

Q385 **Chair:** Would you be happy for us to publish that response?

Dr Shah: Can I come back to you on that? It was a private note for the board—

Chair: Yes. We think that it is quite helpful in setting out all the issues and going through them one by one.

Dr Shah: Indeed, and I will reflect on that and try to look at it positively. It slightly goes back to your point about speed. If we do this work quite quickly—I asked for it to be done straightaway, because we were having a board meeting. We had the response, but we kept it to ourselves. To me, it becomes part of this examination of what lessons we can learn about this, but also about the speed of action, what we can do and how we can publish more and be more transparent, so we are not on the back foot. We need to understand the world we live in, and that if you don't get out on the front foot, they will fill that vacuum with whatever they want to say. I think that is a really important point.

Q386 **Chair:** With that pace in mind, could you let us know quickly?

Dr Shah: I will let you know at great pace.

Chair: And also whether you are going to be publishing the new Peter Johnston report that you mentioned in response to Damian's questions.

Dr Shah *indicated assent.*

Q387 **Chair:** That is very kind. Thank you all for appearing in front of us today. Are there any further messages that you want to leave us with?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Shah: No, I don't think so. Thank you.

Chair: You have had enough, okay. Thank you very much, everyone, for attending today.