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Right Liz, tell us where you were born, your education and how your career started.

Well, I'm Liz Forgan, I was born in 1944 in Calcutta, I was a war baby. I went to boarding school in England, at Benenden, and then to read modern languages at Oxford. And my career started by accident like all good journalists. I'd been mucking around after university, didn't know what to do, and my father was working in an oil company in Iran, so I popped out there to see what was happening and thought it looked nice, and to stay there I had to get a job and you needed a work permit to get a job, very few things I could do that an Iranian couldn't, but I got a job on one of the local papers in English, so I became a journalist by accident. I worked there for about a year, then came back, realised I'd chosen by luck the very thing I wanted to do, came back to London, worked on the *Ham and High* for about five years, then the *Evening Standard*, then *The Guardian* Woman's Page, and then when Channel 4 began I went to interview Jeremy Isaacs for *The Guardian* and just before he started Channel 4 it was announced that he was going to be the Chief Executive, did a wonderful interview, at the end of which I said, 'How marvellous it all sounds, I wish you the very best of luck', and he said, 'Well would you like to come and help me start it?' So I said to him, 'You can't possibly mean that, I hate television like all good newspaper journalists, it's awful stuff, never watched it, don't care about it, don't know anything about it'. 'Perfect', he said, 'just the very person'. So I became Head of Factual Programmes, News and Current Affairs and Documentaries at Channel 4 and then later Director of Programmes.

Tell us a bit about the starting up and the…

Of Channel 4? Well, I think that in the whole history of human communications, Channel 4 was probably the luckiest institution that has ever been invented. It was lucky because it had three things in place at once at the beginning, which are very unusual. One was an extraordinary remit from the government, which was obliging it by law to be innovative and to cater for tastes that other people weren't catering for. Secondly it had an unbelievably generous funding arrangement whereby the people who were responsible for the programming had absolutely no responsibility for generating the revenue. ITV was obliged to pay us a proportion of their revenues in exchange for being allowed to sell the airtime on Channel 4. So the separation between the financial responsibility and the editorial responsibility gave the new channel terrific freedom. And the third thing it had that was lucky was a Chief Executive who was really absolutely on for making a channel that broke new ground. I mean hence for example appointing me. And at the start it was a tiny little organisation, we thought we could run the whole thing with, I don't know, half a dozen people, because we wouldn't make any programmes, we'd commission them all. I was in charge of news, current affairs, documentaries, sport and the arts, as I remember, at the start. I mean soon we realised this was ridiculous, but it started with a wonderful idea that the actual permanent staff of the channel could be tiny, the channel itself would take no, as it were, ideological responsibility for what it was broadcasting. It was a place for the free expression of all sorts of ideas and styles and creativity and for a while it was that.

What was Jeremy Isaacs like?

He was a terrific boss for that channel. He was extremely brave, absolutely instinctively in tune with the idea of doing things differently and taking risks. He was also very protective, in an intelligent way, of his staff. I mean taking risks is a jolly nice idea, you can find plenty of people who are all in favour of it in theory, but in fact taking risks means that things go wrong. And people don't take risks unless they're absolutely sure that their boss is going to stand by them when things go wrong, and he did, always. So he was full of invention, marvellously creative and very, very courageous in his protection of the people who worked for him. So I think he did a fantastic job.

[05:02]

How did you go out to find people to do programmes or did you wait till people applied?

Well, there was a bit of an ideological argument about that. Were we there to just open the doors and say, you know, join the queue anybody who fancies making a television programme, or were we there to go proactively out and choose. And what actually happened was that the balance between the two changed. At the start we thought, rightly I believe, that our first duty was to set up the stall, open the doors and see what was there. So we were minimally prescriptive at the beginning and we just simply welcomed one and all, great and small, and indeed at one point I became panic-stricken because I was seeing dozens of people every day coming pitching ideas, and as I said to Jeremy one day, look, I haven't a – because I'd never in television – I haven't a clue whether the next person through the door with a programme idea is, you know, the Rembrandt of British television or whether they were last seen selling villas in Lanzarote, you know, I don't know anything about their track record. So would you just mark my card for me if I tell you who's coming to see me? And his reply was another example of how brave he was, 'Certainly not', he said, 'what's the point of having new people if you don't take advantage of their ignorance. Just look them in the eye and if you like what you see, commission the programmes'. So at the start it was very much, here's our brief, who wants to make programmes, and then we made what we could out of what came to us. As time went by we refined the idea of what the channel was, we started to think about the schedule in a more proactive way and the pendulum swung more and more towards the commissioning editor saying this is what we want.

So then you were there for how long? Tell us about some of the programmes that you…

I was there for ten years, we started, I invented indeed, a principle which no longer obtains, but I thought that a channel that was constitutionally bound to be innovative had to be very careful of its own commissioning body getting settled. I mean we were all very radical when we first went there and everything was new and marvellous and exciting, but inevitably, you get settled into your armchair and you get used to a way of doing things and, you know, you lose your cutting edge. And so we had a principle by which the commissioning body would not… nobody would stay there for longer than ten years, we would behave like the American Senate and throw out a third of the commissioning editors, however good they were, every so often so that there was a constant refreshment. Some of my colleagues thought that was a pretty ridiculous policy from the beginning. Michael Grade thought it was absolutely daft and stopped it. I'm still of the view that it

was the right thing to do for a channel with that remit. But anyway, I stayed there for ten years, which was coming close to my own limit, but I did change jobs in the middle, was my excuse. I can't imagine more fun than the first ten years of Channel 4. It was a truly creative and enterprising and stimulating and marvellous place to be. Partly because it was not just an entirely self-indulgent matter with programme makers being allowed to do whatever the hell they wanted, there was a bit of that, quite a lot of that actually, but it was also a time when the business of independent programme making began really. I mean we're responsible for the creation of the independent television sector, essentially, by making it possible for people like that to sell their wares. And gradually the channel soared, the tension, the kind of jostling going on between that urge to be completely free and, you know, creative to say whatever you wanted, and the independent producers gradually coming to terms with the commercial realities of the marketplace, which was a very interesting time from that point of view. We made some truly dreadful programmes, I mean really seriously dreadful programmes. We abused the tolerance of the audience quite a lot in all kinds of ways. I mean not only lots of extremely boring plonkingly left wing rantings, of which there were many, but some frightfully pretentious so-called serious programmes. I remember one for which I was responsible, it was called *Report to the Nation*, it was called in a very, very pompous fashion and it was intended by me to be a sort of antidote to some of the larky, you know, rather naughty boys and girls, and it was the most pompous, pretentious thing you've ever seen. It was intended to take a sort of serious national issue and look at it with a jury of the great and the good. It went on for hours! Four hours or five hours, it seemed like a day and a half. And there were about eight of these things. It was, I think probably, the most boring television programme ever made. I'm sorry about it, but [laughter] it was a good try. But I always thought that people would forgive us anything at the start of Channel 4, except using this wonderful opportunity just to do something safe. I knew that people would forgive us amateurism or going too far or trying things that didn't work, so long as we were actually using the freedom of that funding system and that wonderful remit, and I think we did do that.

[10:49]

The Channel 4 News, how did you make it quite different from the…

Well, the Channel 4 News was one of my main tasks at the start of it all and Jeremy and I had long talks about it and we both agreed that what we wanted – I mean we started from

the proposition, should we have any news at all, I mean nothing was given, you know, should we have any news at all - it was clear that the ITC expected there to be news – and we thought if we had the news we should only have the news if we can do something different with it. So we thought there are already two very good half hour news programmes on the BBC and on ITV, what can we do that's different. And we decided that what British television needed was a longer, more analytical news which got a grip of the idea that television could actually deal with complicated subjects in a serious fashion. The accepted view was that television was essentially pictures, had to go very fast, a minute and thirty seconds was about the size of a news item and it was utterly essential to have moving pictures to accompany everything otherwise the viewers wouldn't tolerate it. And that gave you serious limitations in the sort of journalism you could do, so we decided that our job was to test the proposition that if you stood all those things on their head television could actually do a serious analytical approach to news that got behind things and was specialist. So the first thing we did was double the slot, and the second thing we did was to hire two or three serious specialists: Sarah Hogg was the economics specialist and Godfrey Hodgson was the foreign affairs specialist, two - Godfrey had television experience, Sarah had none – but they were two absolutely top flight journalists in their fields, but had certainly never done that job on a television news programme before. We also laid down some rules about the agenda. No royal stories, no sport and absolutely no wallpaper shots of limousines drawing up outside buildings to illustrate, you know, government talks with this or that. And then we said, and by the way we're having no desks for the presenters either and we're not going to have a boring old blue set like everyone else, it's all going to be different. So it certainly did turn out to be different, some of it was more successful than others. The 'no blue' set ended up a sort of dingy brown that reminded everyone of the dirty protests currently going on at the Maze, the presenters having no desks meant that quite often all their papers fell on the floor in the middle of the show. Sarah Hogg never did get to grips with television, she always looked like a terrified rabbit and Godfrey wasn't very happy either. And I think the audience missed not having any sport. So we had to compromise on some of those things, but still and all, ITN took a bit of persuading about this, but we had a very powerful card with which to persuade them, because for the first time we were a customer with a cheque in our hands and we said we've come to buy the news from you and the news we want to buy, we will specify the news and you will make it and in exchange we will pay you, which was a new arrangement for television, no-one had ever made news on that basis

before. And when I went to ITN first to explain this sort of news that we wanted, our long, analytical, Sarah Hogg, no sport, no royal family, I could see that this was not going down well with the assembled ITN dignitaries who after all were, you know, quite rightly very proud of the fact that they were making a jolly brilliant, you know, internationally acclaimed news programme and they knew what they were doing and who was I, Miss No-one from nowhere, telling them about what television news was going to be. And at one point when I outlined this concept to them, one of them who just finally could stand it no more said, 'Well Liz' he said, 'There's just one thing I've got to say. You know, honestly when it all comes down to it, the news is the news is the news' he said. And I said, 'If there's one single sentence that sums up what I don't want, it's that'.
[15:07]
And so we had tussles and, you know, we were ridiculous in some of our demands and they were too conservative in some of their resistances and it was a bit up and down, the audience wasn't there for ages and I used to have to reassure the board of the channel quite regularly that things were going to be alright one day, fingers crossed. What saved us was the miners' strike, which happened quite soon after we got going, and the reason that saved us was that the miners' strike was (a) a very important story, (b) it was quite a complicated story and (c) it went on for days and weeks and weeks and weeks. And what that meant for the other news programmes was they never had long to get at this story but they had to do it every night and if you only had a minute thirty seconds you could only tell the same boring top line of the story, you know, hopes raised, hopes fell, talks started, talks stopped. That was all you could ever say in that time, whereas we had ages, so we could get behind that simple story and really get into what actually turned out to be one of the pivotal political and social moments of change in Thatcher's Britain. So we had hours to do interviews with wives and sociological looks at the life of the miner, really get to grips with the issues, and all of that on all sides. And suddenly everybody woke up to the fact that television news was able to get to grips with this story in a completely different way from the normal, and people saw the point of the Channel 4 News at that stage.

Whom did you get or how did you get somebody from ITN actually to do the programme or did you…

Well, we put it out to tender, essentially. We had two serious pitches for it and one was from LWT, John Birt and Barry Cox pitched this programme to me, and bear in mind I am

Miss No-one from nowhere, I've never worked in television, no-one's ever heard of me, I've come from *The Guardian* Woman's Page, and these guys had been spending their lives in television current affairs and they're pretty hotshot, thank you very much. And the Weekend World team had long been dreaming of a programme where what they wanted to do was essentially a half hour news programme leading into a sort of daily weekend world. You'd have a news top and an analytical end to it, and they'd thought it out extremely carefully and done a great deal of work, had LWT, and they'd pitched this proposition with all guns blazing and it was indeed a very impressive one. And in the end we decided that we would not go with them, we would go with ITN because I thought that LWT would never have the fleetness of foot and the speed of journalistic instinct to make this a news programme. In a sense they were the opposite problem. LWT was full of thinking and intellectual bottom, as it were, but they lacked the daily news quickness. ITN was absolutely brilliant at the daily news quickness but did they have the intellectual bottom to make the programme, you know, that we wanted. In the end we thought ITN was a better bet than LWT and so I had to tell John Birt, I'm very sorry John that we're not having you. And I must say, in John Birt's defence, he took it magnificently well. He invited me to lunch some two or three weeks later and I thought, oh dear, you know, this is going to be a very uncomfortable lunch but I'd better take my medicine. So I went out to lunch with him and he said, 'Look' he said, 'I must say just one thing, I think you've made the wrong decision, but there it is, you've made it. And I just want to say that I think Channel 4 is the most important thing that will ever happen to British television in my lifetime and anything that I or LWT can do to make it succeed we will do, so the episode's at an end', which I thought was extremely generous of him really.

But then once you gave it to ITN… you selected some of…

[19:27]

There was a constant jousting between us, as you can imagine, about whose programme this really was and to some extent that focussed on the appointments of the staff. We insisted on Sarah and Godfrey Hodgson. We insisted on an editor not from ITN and ITN then went and appointed, not with our, I mean with our agreement but not with our initiation, a journalist from *The Sunday Times*. He did in fact fit the specification, he didn't come from ITN, he came from *The Sunday Times*, a very reputable upmarket newspaper and he was indeed a very hard-working and experienced and professional

journalist. I think he was the wrong appointment for that job. And anyway, as time went on it was clear he was the wrong appointment and by agreement we decided to change, by agreement we then went to Paul McKee who was at ITN who did a very good transitional job and with agreement we then went to Stewart Purvis who actually really brought the programme I think to its big fruition. But it was a constant sort of, you know, tug and weave between someone that ITN was really happy with who would fit into the organisation, because it's an organisation with a very strong culture and we were trying to change a lot of things and, you know, you had to have a trade-off between somebody who would bring about change but who would be able to bring the organisation with him. It wasn't just a matter of a sort of one-off, this is what we want, thank you very much, we'll see you in a year. It was a constant dialogue between us as the programme took shape and evolved.

What other programmes were you responsible for?

Well, the other programme I was most directly responsible for was the only programme that Channel 4 ever made itself, which was *Right to Reply*, which I thought was an absolutely vital counterbalance to the freedom we were demanding to publish all kinds of, you know, contentious opinion. I thought that if we wanted licence for people to shout politically extreme things, culturally extreme things in a way that television had not done before, what we owed the audience was a genuine opportunity for people who disagreed with what we had published or who had been offended by it to have some kind of real redress. And I looked at all the viewers' programmes that there were on television at the time and it was quite clear that all of them, without exception, were in some way rigged to make sure that the broadcasters always won the arguments. I mean either the audience was sitting literally six feet below the broadcasters looking upwards like children, or they had to put their hands up, or the professionals always got the last word or, you know, whatever. And so we decided to, we created *Right to Reply* with that situation completely reversed. All the rules were rigged in favour of the audience, the complainants. Gus Macdonald we hired as the chairman of it, but not as a neutral chairman, his job was to help the audience make their case in the best way they possibly could. We gave them masses of time, they would come to the channel and spend a day there. We always gave the viewer the last word. And the thing that I think I'm most proud of, having absolutely insisted on, in the teeth, it must be said, of all my professional colleagues, including

Jeremy, was to insist that when people had a complaint we sat them opposite the person who had done whatever it was they were complaining about. If it was the producer it would be the producer, if it was the commissioning editor it would be the commissioning editor, and we would have small numbers of people, we wouldn't have lots and lots of people all shouting, we would have one or two people making their case, but able to look in the eye the person who was actually responsible for whatever it is they were complaining about. I think that was a brilliant idea and I think it worked fantastically well. What was a problem I had not anticipated was that my colleagues, professional television producers, *hated* it. And Jeremy kept saying to me, but these are professional programme makers, you know, they're not professional spokesmen, it's unfair to make them do this. And I said, well too bad, you know, they should be able to explain themselves. And in fairness, some of them in the end, some of them had to be dragged kicking and screaming, but in the end most of them did and I think it really did give viewers a genuine opportunity to engage with broadcasters in a way that they had never been able to do before and actually I think it also made really interesting television too.

The commercials, you didn't go out to sell this time, the space, it came from the ITV…

The ITV companies in exchange for… the deal was that they could keep their monopoly on the sale of television airtime if they sold the airtime on Channel 4 without any say in the programmes and handed over a proportion of their income to fund the channel. That changed, but for the first nine years, eight years of the channel, I forget, but a long time, that was the regime that prevailed and it was very important in enabling the channel to get off the ground as a really risk taking operation.

[25:08]
And what about sort of art, music and arts programmes?

Well, the obligation to be different and to cater for tastes not catered for was interpreted in all kinds of different ways by Channel 4. Sometimes it was interpreted as an invitation to publish lots of left-wing programming, experimental cinema, black and Asian programming, City finance programming, but a very, very big and important area was in the arts, both in the form of a lot of opera and of serious experimental art in forms that television could handle reasonably well. I mean trying to do theatre on television is

terribly difficult. We did a lot of it but mainly it was remade for television, sort of one-man performances and things like that, remade for television. A lot of particularly strong dance programming. Michael Kustow who was the arts commissioning editor, was crazy about Pina Bausch.

How do you spell Cristo?

Kustow – K-U-S-T-O-W. I mean really the story of the channel as a cultural patron is a very important one and he would be well worth talking to about it. But contemporary dance, a certain amount of contemporary music. We commissioned a whole strand of new operas, for instance, short new operas at one point. A lot of orthodox opera, some remade for television drama, some particularly interesting I think, although at the time many people thought them mystifying, documentaries about aesthetics and cultural experiment made by people like John Wyver. Audiences were tiny, but it was very interesting work. And the other strand I suppose in the cultural area was of late night talk. There was a strand called *Visions*, which led to a lot of satire by a number of more philistine viewers, but it was late at night, two or three or four people; Susan Sontag, you know, that sort of person, sitting having the sort of conversation, I mean it was like *The New York Review of Books* only on television and sometimes it was rather boring and pretentious, but sometimes it was absolutely riveting and wonderful and certainly unlike anything you would ever see anywhere else on television.

So now, you left then did you?

Well, after I'd been there ten years I'm beginning to feel uncomfortable because, you know, my rule says I should be gone by now. And at that very moment John Birt said to me – he'd just gone to the BBC, about to become the Director-General, he was the Deputy Director-General – and he said would you come in and run the radio. So I made exactly the same speech I'd made to Jeremy, 'Don't know anything about radio, do listen to it, but never run it, are you sure you want me?' 'Yes, yes, I do.' And I thought, perfect. I always wanted to work for the BBC, everyone in broadcasting does at some point or another, I love listening to the radio, how interesting it would be. So I did, went off to run the radio.

You were in charge of what?

I was Managing Director of Network Radio, which meant Radios 1 and 2, 3, 4 and 5.

How did that go from the beginning?

[29:04]
Well, from the beginning it was rather exciting. I mean it was tough because there were three problems really. One was… there were four problems – challenges, shall we say. One was that John had just started his radical upheavals at the BBC, the internal market, producer choice and all that, which was already in train and was causing terrible havoc inside the organisation. Secondly, commercial radio was just really getting its act together. They'd put their commercial sales together at long last and were beginning to really become a challenge to the BBC's effortless domination of the national broadcasting market, so there was a bit of a competitor for the first time. And there were two of the five networks were in serious need of radical change. One was Radio 1, which still had massive audiences but had sunk culturally to a point where it was virtually indistinguishable from the most banal of the commercial pop stations and was (a) uninteresting and aging and (b) getting increasingly hard to defend as a station that you should be spending the licence fee on. It was not distinctive really from a commercial pop station, so that needed radical change. And then there was Radio 5 which, when I went to the BBC was a piece of frequency that the BBC had just parked things on in order to hang on to it, basically. And on it they had parked schools programming, sport and young people's programming, and they had nothing to do with each other at all, so every time you stopped doing sport and went over to schools the entire audience left. It was impossible ever to grow the network and it was really incoherent. It was doing some very good work because, particularly in the sport and young people's section, the young people's section had no money at all, but nobody was caring about it, they were just left alone to get on with it, and so a whole bunch of kids with two elastic bands and a piece of chewing gum were producing really interesting radio, but unfortunately as a network it was no use. And there was another problem which was that just before I went there the Director-General, then Michael Checkland, had startled everybody by announcing on a public platform that the BBC would launch a twenty-four hour news radio station on the Radio 4 AM frequency. Well, first of all the appetite for a twenty-four hour news station

had been entirely engendered by the Falklands War which was now over and everybody knew that a twenty-four hour news service was not going to have much of an audience. And secondly, what no-one had realised was that a large section of the Radio 4 audience listened to its Radio 4 on the AM frequency and were not about to change, thank you very much, either because they had radios that didn't have FM or they were in places where you couldn't get FM, or they just didn't like twiddling the knobs. So there was a terrible hoo-ha. Anyway, cut a long story short, I decided that Radio 1 just had to be completely refocused, it had to be young and distinctive and different even at the loss of audience, Matthew Bannister came in and did that with a huge loss of audience, but he refocused the network in absolutely the right way, we fended off all attempts to privatise it and I think that was a success. Radio 5, I decided that the Radio 5 problem and the twenty-four hour news network problem needed to be solved together, and so I axed the old Radio 5 and I started a news and sport network with, instead of the original plan which had just been to have twenty-four hours of the sort of news and current affairs background of Radio 4, I thought this is a waste, it's wonderful programming but we're already doing that, what we're not doing is serving the under thirty audience with the sort of quality journalism that the BBC is looking after its over thirty audience, so why don't we put the young audience for sport together with this promise about the twenty-four hour news and have a different tone of voice, a different agenda, a news station aimed at young people and hooked by the sport, which indeed we did, and it proved to be a very great success. At the price though of having fired a lot of very talented, hard working people off the old Radio 5. Luckily, it was a success and luckily I knew so little about the BBC when I went there that I was completely unaware of all the consultation you were supposed to do before you did things like that at the BBC, so I just did it and then discovered afterwards that there were at least twenty-five committees I should have gone and consulted, at which point we'd never have done it because Michael Green would have started a sport network and we'd never have got it off the ground.

What's John Birt like?

[34:30]

Hm. He's personally a very, very nice man indeed; unusual, funny, great fun. He's a man of, in some ways, tremendous courage, enormous intellectual weight, real strategic thinker, absolutely hopeless at communicating with people and a prisoner of a sort of rigid

hierarchical view, mechanistic view of life and the way it works. You could see both his strengths and his weaknesses in what he did at the BBC. I think the BBC owes him a lot, I think that he… it is arguable that if John hadn't done what he did, the BBC would not still be funded by licence fee today, I think that, and it took a lot of guts to do it. But, you know, having completely steam-rollered the whole place, having set it on a correct strategic path as far as the digital future was concerned, two big pluses, he never ever managed to translate that into a real regard for and communication with, you know, the creative people that absolutely make the place. They always felt that he was their suspicious enemy, and to some extent they felt it with justice.

Yes, I mean one got the impression from outside that having worked for the BBC, I found that a lot of the creative people were feeling very hamstrung.

Yeah. Some of that was they needed to feel, frankly. Some of that was because the place was run in a very self-indulgent way and John posed some absolutely necessary questions. But it was a miserably, wretchedly unhappy place and people felt unvalued by their own leader and just, I mean to be the leader of a creative organisation like that you simply have to be able to give people the sense that you share their passion for what they make and do, and John never did that.

Also he didn't really manage to reduce the bureaucracy.

No. He reduced some of it but he was a terrible bureaucracy producer himself because he was, I mean absolutely obsessed with control and reviewing and bits of paper and consultants and all that stuff. Terrible producer of wasted effort and bits of analysis, awful.

And whenever I've worked for the BBC it was always, that was the terrible thing that you had to go through so many people and decisions and that sort of thing.

Yes. Well, I'm afraid it bedevils the organisation, it really does, I mean it's in the water supply but John I think made it quite a lot worse.

So what happened after that?

Well, we had a disagreement, John and I. I mean I remain an admirer of his in many ways, but we came to an impasse because he decided that the BBC's journalism which had hitherto been in two different operations, one for television and one for radio, needed to be brought altogether on a bi-media basis and moved down to Television Centre to a sausage factory where all the journalists would sit in the same place and they would just produce radio and television as needed. And I thought that was absolutely the wrong thing to do from radio's point of view. I had five networks, each of which had a completely different character. Radio went genre separated long before television, television's doing it now in the digital age, but radio had long ago gone, separated its networks to serve particular audiences. And the whole essence of that to me meant that just as they needed music and speech that was tailored to their own audience, they also needed news that was tailored to their audience. I mean the Radio 1 audience were not interested in the same things as the Radio 2 audience or the Radio 4 audience in the same order and so the idea that you made one lot of news from a sort of central kitchen and piped it out into the gaps that appeared in radio networks just seemed to me awful. I thought that the people who made the news, just like the people who made everything else in a network needed to be inside the network. Radio's completely different to television in that way. Television is a train with lots of separate carriages that run along a track and radio isn't separate carriages at all, radio is a continuous flow and it's really important that whenever in the day you turn on a radio network you recognise its tone of voice, and you couldn't have a coherent tone of voice if the people making the news programmes were, you know, the other side of London talking to completely different people and in the next half hour producing news for BBC1. So I said…

Also for the interview… for them to have to go there.

[39:56]
Well, one of the crazy things was moving down to Television Centre meant that radio's flagship programme, the *Today* programme, which is in some ways the BBC's flagship programme as well, was moved to a place where a child of six could have told you no politician would ever bother schlepping down there at seven o'clock in the morning. And, you know, there was a lot of, oh well, with the modern communications, you know, people can communicate from everywhere. It's not the same! You can hear it on the radio when

someone's sitting in the studio with Jim Naughtie looking them in the eye, it's not the same if they're perched in some radio car somewhere else. And I think that John, who is a television person through and through, he just simply had not engaged with that critical aspect of radio, which is the quality of the sound, you can hear it in your ears if someone isn't absolutely engaged and part of a radio station. You can't get away with just patching in bits of radio. You can hear the joins where you can't see them on television.

I believe he didn't have much sympathy for the World Service and for the European service?

Well, I didn't know much about that. He certainly I think looked at it with some baleful suspicion, that is true. I don't think he really was interested in radio, I really don't. And that may be… I mean radio people are very paranoid about television people. I was regarded with immense suspicion when I appeared simply because I'd come from television. And it's not surprising, because television people are unbelievably ignorant about and patronising of radio. They think it's sort of, you know, it's the nursery slopes, which is quite ridiculous. But I mean that's the other reason I completely disagreed with John's bi-media idea, that all journalists should make radio and television, you know, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday radio, Thursday, Friday television. I think that what happens if you do that is that you get an average competence everywhere, but what you lose is the geniuses off either end, you lose the people whose brilliance on television is writing words to pictures, making words fit, and you lose the people on radio whose brilliance is in making pictures out of words, you know. Those people vanish and you get journeymen in between. Anyway, it now seems that everyone's all understood that this was all wrong and it's all now being undone again, but there we are. Anyway, cut back. I said to John, 'John, I think this is terribly wrong, I really do, and I think it's very important and I think we ought to debate this in front of the governors', and to his credit he said yes, and we did, and John said – or he didn't, Tony Hall said – 'I want to do this, we must save all this money, it's efficient, it's modern, we've got new communications, we've got computers, we can do this'. And I said, 'No we can't, it'll wreck the radio'. And the governors were put in a very difficult position because they knew that it was really either me or John, so they decided to stick with their Director-General, as I expected they would, and so I said, well, I've lost the argument, you can't have a Managing Director that's at odds with you on a fundamental matter of policy like this, so goodbye. Whereupon they

all said, 'You can't leave!' And I said, 'Of course I can, you can either have me or the policy, but not both'. So I left.

So what did you do then?

Well, I thought I would just look around. I'd had a lovely time, I mean you know, not many people have such good fortune in a career in the media that I've had and I thought I don't really want to rush into another bed of nails or go and run some poxy old cable station, I think I'll just enjoy myself, so I do. I do a bit of radio, a bit of television, a bit of newspapers, I do all sorts of other things, I work at the BBC quite a lot, I do some consultancy, which is great fun.

So shall we stop for a moment?

[break in recording]

What else?

One of the questions that we thought we'd tackle at Channel 4, which remember began in 1982, so kind of when the Women's Movement was really thriving and hot, was this argument about whether the fact that hard current affairs was almost all made by men, whether this was a good thing, a bad thing or didn't matter at all. And *World in Action*, *Panorama*, were almost all men and women were for a long time complaining that they'd been excluded from this, it was a macho [incomp – 44:41]. So I said okay, we'll have our mainstream single issue current affairs investigative programme will be commissioned exclusively from women, and let's see if it makes any difference. And we commissioned two lots of women producers: one was a sort of feminist collective called Broadside, and the other was a much more orthodox company called Twenty Twenty Vision, which is still in being, which was headed by Claudia Milne who had worked for *World in Action*, so came out of…

[45:14 - recording stops abruptly]

[46:51]
[Side 2]

So we had two teams making our main current affairs programme: Broadside, the feminist collective; and Twenty Twenty Vision, the sort of orthodox *World in Action* trained group. And they all made absolutely riveting programmes of a very different sort. But I think in the end the answer to the question was, if you had women making mainstream current affairs would they make it differently from men, is on the whole not much. Two things were different. With Broadside the agenda was different, there was certainly more kind of sexual politics and things like that in terms of the subjects that they chose. Both of them chose many more female witnesses to interview than a normal current affairs programme, which was interesting and I think important. And then one of them said to me, you know, when I asked them, what differences do you think there have been as a result of the fact that you're women, she said something interesting to me. She said, 'Well, I can think of one instance', and she showed it to me and I saw it, where she was interviewing an MP standing on St Stephen's Green and he was I think a Conservative MP who'd made a lot of very fiery speeches attacking the then Conservative government about some element of policy, but when push came to shove he'd dutifully gone into the lobbies and voted with the government and she was challenging him about why he'd done this. So the shot is over his shoulder and so you see her face, the reporter, and she says, 'Look, you made all these fiery speeches but when it came to the point you just bottled out didn't you, and you went and did what the whips told you'. And there's a pause and he then gives the sort of party line about, you know, in the end I considered all the facts and came to the view that on this occasion, blah-di-blah, complete, you know, politician bullshit. And then there's silence and you just see her look at him and he says, 'Oh, don't look at me like that!' he says, which actually eloquently told you her scepticism and his essentially giving in, saying alright, I did bottle out. But she said to me, 'And I think it was quite right, he would never have done that if I'd been a man'. The fact that he was talking to a woman just sort of he didn't take me seriously, he turned into a normal person, he dropped his professional guard, and I think that was an interesting aspect of it. But they made good programmes and did good work, I mean did some quite fantastically good work, not least I think one of the most important programmes we made which was the interview with Cathy Massiter, MI5's official secrets, when Cathy Massiter came out of MI5 and told the story about F Branch that had been set up to do internal surveillance and had been routinely

spying on trade unionists and members of left-wing political parties, which was an interesting and important story.

[50:04]

The other difficult, I mean there were a lot of contentious programmes, but another one I remember was a series that Ken Loach made for Channel 4, called *Questions of Leadership* and it was about the British trade union movement and it, typically of Ken, it was absolutely brilliantly made, brilliantly made. I have never before or since seen anything on television that so graphically gave you the feeling of what it was like to be at a trade union meeting, the sort of green stacking chairs, the really, you know, down to the nitty-gritty bit of what trade union day-to-day life was like. But the main thesis of this was Ken's view that the trade union leadership had basically sold out the members by ratting on revolutionary principles and surrendering to the bosses. And the series was quite long and it went on and on for five episodes I think. And it went, as I remember it, union by union, revealing the leaders of the different large trade unions to be cowards, poltroons and traitors. And brilliantly done. Then the trade union leadership got to hear of this and started to put pressure on the channel through, I think directly through the then Chairman, Edmund Dell who'd been a Labour politician and no doubt knew lots of them. The series was made by Ken for us through Central Television and I was then Head of Factual Programmes, so this, I didn't directly commission it, but this mess fell into my lap, what's to be done. So I looked at all this stuff and it was terribly unfair, ie one-sided, but brilliantly made and an absolutely rivetingly interesting and important story about British trade unionism. So by this time the Chairman was up in arms and said, 'We can't have this dreadful, dangerous, revolutionary stuff, this is outrageous, the channel will be brought into disrepute, it's grossly unfair, it breaches all the principles of objective journalism'. And I kept saying, 'Well we're not just here for objective journalism, there must be a way that we can manage this'. And so I agreed with Jeremy Isaacs that what I would try to do, I persuaded Ken that he would make a sixth programme in which all these trade union leaders would be given a chance to reply and state their case, which seemed to me perfectly fair and reasonable and well worth the currency to buy the rest of the series. So Ken agrees to this I think and one by one we go round the other trade union leaders and with some difficulty we persuade them to join in this enterprise, because they're not fools and they know that if they just hold out for the empty chair they've got a good chance of killing this series altogether. And the last one was – there were two last people who would not come on side – one was Frank Chapple and the other was Moss Evans. And it was

time for the Trade Union Congress, and so I went to the Trade Union Congress with the sole aim of persuading these two to agree to take part in our sixth programme, which would then enable us to transmit the whole series. I have never in my life drunk so much whisky as I drank in that week, it was excruciating. I sat up for hours and hours into the middle of the night, endless, endless arguing and talking. Anyway, finally at last everyone agrees. I return in triumph to London only to find that Edmund Dell has picked up the series bodily and given it back to Central, who buried it and it was never seen from that day to this. So I think that was a big failure on Channel… and Ken of course then got absolutely furious and got all his children to write me letters about how I had [laughter] wrecked their daddy's career, which I thought was a bit tough under the circumstances. But it was a poor decision, Edmund was not a good chairman for a channel like that, he never did get the point of Channel 4, he never got any pleasure out of its strengths, he just was appalled by its failures.

Was he a political appointment?

[54:26]
Well I think he was a very clever man who had no luck at all in politics. He should have been, had there been a Labour government instead of a Thatcher government, he would probably have been the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and who knows, he might have been a very good one. As it was, the party went into opposition, he was sort of spare. He was also I think chairman of a merchant bank and things all went wrong so he was even sparer, and he was given Channel 4 and I thought he believed he was coming to something that was a sort of cross between *The Financial Times* and *Panorama* and was absolutely shocked and horrified genuinely to be confronted with, you know, the Black Audio Collective and [laughter] things like that. He never got any joy out of it at all.

So let's pause again, what else…

[break in recording]

That really is the end of the interview, and a very remarkable one too.

[end of recording – 55:39]

Queries

p.16 – macho ? [incomp – 44:41] talking about Channel 4 current affairs