ANDREW MARR SHOW
Interview with
MARK THOMPSON, former BBC Director-General

ANDREW: Mark Thompson's time as Director-General of the BBC coincided with some of the corporation's most turbulent times, the worst of which was of course the Jimmy Savile scandal. After eight years at the top of the BBC, Thompson was appointed CEO of The New York Times and has been living in the US ever since. He was back in London recently and he came in to discuss his new book, "Enough Said". In it, Mark Thompson claims that language is central to everything that's going wrong in modern politics.

MT: It’s my view that although there never was a Garden of Eden, there was never a perfect moment, but a number of things have happened, essentially disruption in politics at the breakup of – of the – the kind of monopoly of the big parties.

AM: Yeah.

MT: Disruption of media, the accelerating effect of media, and the accelerating effect of digital social media in particular. All of these things taken together, I think, are producing something which I do think of as a crisis.

AM: So it’s basically short sound bites, language that is too crude, too aggressive, is stopping people watching and the rest of us from thinking properly about the big political issues ahead of us.

MT: That’s a big part of it. I think also the way in which we’re – we’re struggling now to figure out the authority which – expertise, brief –

AM: This country's had enough of experts, Michael Gove told us..

MT: Michael Gove, I thought Michael Gove's saying was very telling, you know. Peo- people have had enough of experts. Modern government is built on technocracy, it’s built on expertise, and it’s a very big step to say – though I’m sure Gove was onto
something, that many people have simply stopped listening to experts.

AM: So let’s talk some examples here. We have – on the one hand we have the Prime Minister saying that leaving the EU would ‘put a bomb under the economy.’
MT: That’s it.
AM: And the Chancellor saying that we’d have an austerity budget and a very, very tough time to come. Really it was going to be the – the plagues of Egypt visited on Britain if we dared to leave the EU. And on the other side we had people like Michael Gove and Boris Johnson talking about 350 million pounds a week coming into the NHS. Now, all of that was probably wrong.
MT: Well, certainly wild exaggeration, and presenting possibilities as if they were certainties. I thought overall, I thought the Brexit side, I thought, ‘take back control,’ ‘independence day,’ represented a kind of victory on the Brexit side. They found pithy, clear benefits you could encapsulate in a few words.

AM: But isn’t that just good politics? Framing your argument, finding the phrase and ramming it home?
MT: Sure. But I think, you know, in – in – in previous generations they weren’t the whole of it. There was a time when newspapers printed extensive extracts from political speeches. When I started at the BBC, yes, there’d be the headline, ‘the lady’s not for turning,’ but beneath the headline there’d be two or three other extracts and précis of what else Margaret Thatcher said in that case for the Conservative Party. And what’s happened is it’s concentrated, in – in my view, down, so that all many voters hear is just these key phrases.

AM: Do you think the BBC is partly culpable?
MT: Well, I certainly – I certainly believe – and what’s troubling about what’s happened is, despite the BBC and despite this extraordinarily large journalistic organisation, I think we are
getting into trouble in the UK in the way we talk and debate about language. So the BBC hasn’t done enough. I think it’s very hard, I think there are immense forces at play on politics and media. At its best I think the BBC does try very, very hard to bring context and explanation to the way it does journalism. And one of the reasons for having a really strong, powerful, broad BBC is to make sure that the national debate really happens effectively.

AM: And of course referendums change things completely. Because here on the newspaper review and all the rest, we had to balance Brexit versus non-Brexit in every case.

MT: So referendums present, I think, very difficult, possibly even under the current rules, insuperable problems for broadcasters. You have to imaginary parties. They’re temporary, they’re going to cease –

AM: In and Out, yeah.

MT: In and Out. They’re going to cease to exist the day that the vote happens, and yet you’ve got to treat them as if they are exactly equally balanced in the – in the polls. And in a sense, if – if one side, you know, produces and eminent, you know, economist, the other side produces, you know, Coco the Clown, they’re sort of treated as if they’re somehow equal. So I think there may be a case for looking at the rules for how referenda are – are covered in – in broadcasting.

AM: let’s move on to the BBC, because this is the first time we’ve had a chance to talk since the biggest scandal that hit the BBC, I think, probably ever: the Jimmy Savile scandal. Now, you were clear at the time that you knew nothing about the sexual allegations against him. But given that BBC people were investigated and did know about it, was it right that the – the guy at the top of the organisation, the Director General, didn’t know?

MT: The – the – the normal routine when I was Director General – I’m sure still today – would be that – that every investigation that’s – that’s under way which is likely to be serious would be
written – there was a – there was a system for – for – for getting it out, so I would know about it, and I think I knew about virtually all of them. I wasn’t, as it happens, informed about – about this one. And I think should have been.

AM: Helen Boaden, who was head of the news at the time, does say that she did tell you.
MT: Well, the – the – that doesn’t – I think it’s – it’s absolutely common ground that the – the formal way of doing it did not happen. And certainly I knew absolutely nothing even about the existence of the investigation until some time after the decision had been taken to stop the investigation. But I think I should have been told, yes.

AM: Do you look back on that episode as – as a low moment?
MT: Well, I think that it’s clearly a matter of great regret that the BBC had a – a – a – Newsnight had a – a – it’s a terrible story but it’s a incredibly important story, in the public interest to be – to be told, that they had information and – and the – in the end – I mean, I understand, I absolutely believe, as Nick Pollard said in his inquiry, that it was done, again, in good faith. That the – the editor decided not to proceed with that investigation. That’s a matter of – of great – great regret. And behind that obviously – the terrible things Jimmy Savile did in relation to his BBC employment and many other public organisations is, I think, one of the most shocking stories I’ve ever heard.

AM: We have a new governance, of course, for the BBC now, a new organisation to take over the BBC Trust and about almost half of the people on that are going to be appointed by the government of the day. Are you happy about that?
MT: I – I think it’s not desirable that the majority of people in what’s essentially going to be the key decision-making body of the organisation, with editorial decisions inevitably coming up, that the majority should be only appointed by – by the government.
And I hope that over the coming weeks a way will be found. I mean, there – there are many ways in which you – you could have the government nominating but the independent directors approving nominations, you could have joint – joint appointments. There are lots of ways it could be solved. I don’t think the British public want the BBC to be a government-controlled organisation. Now, I’m not suggesting that’s what the government has in mind, but I think the more –

AM: They should think again. Of the detail.

MT: The more – remember we’re talking about a moment where the public at large are really suspicious of elites. It’s really important that the government – governance arrangements for the BBC pass the sniff test.

AM: Mark Thompson, thank you very much.

MT: Thank you, Andrew.