ANDREW MARR:
The BBC achieved record ratings during the Olympics. Twenty-seven million people watched the open ceremony and there were similarly huge audiences for the gold medal winning performances by the likes of Mo Farar and Jessica Ennis. It was the culmination of Mark Thompson’s eight years as Director General of this organisation. Tomorrow he hands the baton onto his successor George Entwistle. Although he leaves on the high of the Games, he’s had his fair share of controversies from the antics of Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand to rows about his own salary and now 20 per cent budget cuts, which are leading to thousands of redundancies. The media environment is changing drastically. And Mark Thompson joins me now. Welcome.

MARK THOMPSON:
Good morning.

ANDREW MARR:
Let’s start, if we may, just talking about the BBC. I guess the Olympics were the highlight, were they; the best was at the end?

MARK THOMPSON:
I thought this summer was amazing actually, and I just thought it showed how close the BBC and the British public are - the coverage of the sport itself, those twenty-four channels so people could choose and watch everything they wanted - but also just that it was an amazing moment for the country and I thought that we were there in the right way. Around that though, the Cultural Olympiad, an amazing Prom season, those Shakespeare plays we did …

ANDREW MARR:
Fantastic.

MARK THOMPSON:
… and some other great stuff - Parade’s End, for example, running right now. So really I mean everything that in a sense I hoped and prayed it would be; it came good.

ANDREW MARR:
On the downside, I guess the Russell Brand moment was probably your hardest, was it?

MARK THOMPSON:
To be honest, by far the most difficult thing that happened when I was Director General was the Alan Johnston kidnapping.

ANDREW MARR:
Right.

MARK THOMPSON:
When somebody’s life’s at stake …

ANDREW MARR:
Yes, it’s a different order of seriousness.

MARK THOMPSON:
… it’s a completely different thing. But of course Jonathan and Russell loom large. I
mean I suppose what I’d say is this. That with an organisation like the BBC, if you’re broadcasting literally tens of thousands of hours of live broadcasting and recognising occasionally that presenters do crazy things, you’re going to have problems sometimes, and sometimes you know you’re going to find things which are wrong. When we talk to the public though, it’s interesting. Even in the middle of the Ross/Brand row or a little bit earlier on in the Competitions row, the public said we trust the BBC to understand that this is wrong and to put it right. And I think that that’s how you’re judged about whether you can discriminate and work out where the boundaries are; and if you go over the boundary, to act really promptly. And I would say there’s a contrast between the way we’ve handled these things if you take the newspapers and phone hacking - years go by and it’s not clear that the people behind it understood for years that it was wrong.

ANDREW MARR:
So if the BBC is held to a higher level of accountability, what about the whole money question as well because you got a bit of stick for your salary, lots of presenters got stick for their salary, and a general feeling certainly in the first half of your tenure that there were too many executives being paid a great deal too much. Do you think that was actually a fair criticism?

MARK THOMPSON:
Well I think what’s the dilemma? The dilemma is that the public want the BBC to be the best broadcaster in the world. I think we are overall. You want the best people in front of the camera, in front of the microphone and behind the camera. At the same time - and it’s certainly true over, as it happens, over the time when I was Director General - the public mood changed and also the market changed in media. And I think what you would have seen over this time is I and the governing body, the BBC Trust, I think responding pretty promptly. I don’t think there’s another public institution which moved so quickly to try and address what I would regard as legitimate public concern on these issues.

ANDREW MARR:
So when you heard people saying that your 850 whatever thousand was too much, did you think yes, hold on a minute, the mood in the country has changed and actually
they have a point and I have to really reconsider this?

MARK THOMPSON:
Well I joined the BBC as Director General in 2004. From day one - and this was years before it became an issue - I waived all bonuses. I’ve never taken a bonus in this job because I think there is a sensitivity in particular about public servants taking bonuses. And over the time, I think my pay has gone down by 40 per cent in real terms, 25 per cent in headline terms. What the BBC tries to do in the way it runs itself is to try to be sensitive again to what its owners, the British public, think. And there’s no question we’ve seen over the last eight years, not just to do with the BBC but to do with the whole of public life, a real change in attitude about these things and we’ve tried to respond to it.

ANDREW MARR:
So a good thing that your successor is getting what about half of what you got at the time?

MARK THOMPSON:
Well I think the BBC will continue to wrestle with that challenge: how do you get the very best - the best sports rights, the best presenters and the best creative leaders - and do that in a way which is acceptable to the public?

ANDREW MARR:
Of course overhanging all of this is the effective 20 - 17 to 20 per cent real terms cut in what the BBC’s got. Is this as bad as it can get for the BBC without starting to lose services in large numbers?

MARK THOMPSON:
My view - and this was my view in 2010 when the licence fee settlement was reached in fairly short order - was that the BBC was being asked actually to make about 16 per cent cuts over 4 years, very much in line with what the British Museum, the National Gallery, the National Theatre … In other words, those cultural institutions which actually in many ways the government was trying to relatively protect in a very tough period for public spending, the BBC was being asked to do the same. And I think in
the end, you can’t want to be the national broadcaster and not go through some of the same experiences …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Pain, exactly.

MARK THOMPSON:
… as the rest of the country. However, what I do think - I think these cuts are achievable without a loss in quality, but I think we’re getting very, very close to the edge now. There are many parts of the BBC - we saw the controversy about local radio - where when you look around the operation, it’s very hard to see what more you can cut. So I would very much hope that when the BBC’s funding comes up for discussion again in 2015/2016 that it’s recognised that if you want a great BBC with really high quality, it’s got to be paid for.

ANDREW MARR:
This is your last day in office, and from that perspective what’s the future of television because we’ve got you know lots and lots of younger people who barely watch television in the old way these days?

MARK THOMPSON:
Well I think you put your finger on it - not in the old way. TV is changing. People want choice about when they watch a given programme. The BBC iPlayer has really almost revolutionised that. How they watch it - lots of different devices: those smart phones, the tablets. And choice in their hands. I mean the twenty-four channels in the Olympics.

ANDREW MARR:
Yes.

MARK THOMPSON:
People deciding themselves, people being their own schedule and their own controller. But the fundamental point - do people want to connect with television - there’s no evidence in the UK or around the world that television is going out of style.
People’s fascination with live television, with great entertainment - we’ve seen Strictly coming back on the air - I think that’s completely undiminished.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Do you think it’s possible that the BBC, similar organisations, will cease to be what we call broadcasters and become effectively publishers - makers of programmes and then people can get those programmes in a hundred and one different ways?

**MARK THOMPSON:**
As it happens, I don’t. I think in the way that ‘broadcaster’ may well be an obsolescent term, I think ‘publisher’ probably is as well.

**ANDREW MARR:**
That’s a fair point.

**MARK THOMPSON:**
If you take BBC news, even today BBC news is a kind of cloud of information. People often forget how they heard a news story - was it on the television, on the radio or via their Blackberry or their iPhone or on a screen at work. Already we’re beginning to see multimedia use of news and I think we’ll see that more and more. But I think the idea of gathering public money together to pay for and to be pooled to create really high quality content - you know be it at the BBC or for that matter be it the New York Times - I believe that quality is going to be one of the real discriminators in this period.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Alright, well thank you very much indeed for that. You’re off to New York very soon?

**MARK THOMPSON:**
Yeah, yeah. I mean I’m starting properly in November, but I’ll be spending a bit of time there beforehand.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Are you going to become an American? I know you’re married to an American. Will you become one?

MARK THOMPSON:
(laughs) I’ve no immediate plans. I’m a Brit through and through and a proud one.

ANDREW MARR:
Mark Thompson, thank you very much indeed for joining us.

INTERVIEW ENDS