ANDREW MARR:
Now when the new Culture Secretary John Whittingdale was appointed in May, there were a few worried faces here at the BBC. Now wonder, you may think, with stories that the former Select Committee Chairman was hostile to the regressive licence fee and he’d been appointed by the Prime Minister to sort out the bloated corporation. Since then he’s been at pains to point out that no decisions have been taken yet. The green paper on the subject, which came out on Thursday, simply seeks to start a debate about the future of the BBC. So let’s talk to the Secretary of State who joins me now from Maldon in Essex. Welcome and good morning to you.

JOHN WHITTINGDALE:
Good morning.

ANDREW MARR:
Good morning. Could I ask, first of all, whether you think The Sun was right to publish those pictures of the Queen at the age of six?

JOHN WHITTINGDALE:
I think that’s a matter for The Sun. It’s an editorial judgement. It’s up to the press to
decide what is, what is not appropriate to print. They decided clearly there was a public interest and the British public will judge whether or not they were right.

**ANDREW MARR:**
But as a newspaper reader, do you think there was a public interest?

**JOHN WHITTINGDALE:**
Well of course I have a rule as ultimately overseeing the question of press regulation, but I think it is a matter for editorial judgement. Sometimes you know editors have difficult decisions. Sometimes people will think they’re right, sometimes wrong. If people disagree, there are complaint procedures now. We have an independent press regulator that is available. But I can understand in this particular instance why the palace were upset by it.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Is there going to be some kind of inquiry into how that film came to be in the hands of The Sun?

**JOHN WHITTINGDALE:**
Well that, I don’t know. Obviously it’s up to any individual if they wish to pursue a complaint. There is, as I say, a new independent press regulator. There’s also the law. It’s not for me to say whether there should be an inquiry, but you know obviously it was upsetting to the palace and I understand that.

**ANDREW MARR:**
It was upsetting to the palace. Have you spoken to the palace about it?

**JOHN WHITTINGDALE:**
No I haven’t.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Okay let’s turn to the BBC now.

**JOHN WHITTINGDALE:**
ANDREW MARR:
And that’s what they should do. Yeah, okay. Let’s talk about the BBC. As a viewer of television programmes presumably and a listener to its radio output, what do you make of the BBC? Do you love the BBC?

JOHN WHITTINGDALE:
I do, I’m a huge admirer of the BBC. I’ve said many times that I think at its best the BBC is the finest broadcaster in the world. But every ten years the BBC’s charter expires and that’s the right time when we should look at what the BBC does, how it’s financed, how it’s governed, and consider whether or not changes should be made. And that’s even more important this time because of the enormous change that’s taken place in the whole of the media since the last charter was renewed.

ANDREW MARR:
So we’re in this slew of change. What are the kind of parameters of the green paper process? I mean could we end up, as Tony Hall as suggested, with a bigger BBC and a higher licence fee as a result?

JOHN WHITTINGDALE:
Well I mean every option is on the table. The BBC needs to make a case and they will be doing as part of a process as to what they think is the right role for the BBC in today’s media. We’ll also want to hear from other people - people who are offering alternative services to the BBC and we’re wanting to hear from the public as well - and so I hope there will be the most wide ranging debate. Given that there has been an enormous explosion of choice if you like in the last ten years, when we last looked at the charter most households had simply access to five TV channels. Now the BBC alone have nine channels and we’ve had a whole lot of new entrants into the market – people like Netflix and Amazon and BT. We’ve got catch-up services which never existed ten years ago. So there has been an enormous increase in the amount of content available and many people would say that that means that the BBC ought to take … ought to look carefully at their programming to make sure that it’s distinctive
and it’s not reproducing simply what is available elsewhere.

**ANDREW MARR:**
There’s been a lot of comment over the last few days about this letter from the various celebrities like David Attenborough and Michael Palin, Annie Nightingale and so forth. Do you think the BBC reaction – because they clearly coordinated that letter – do you think the BBC reaction was a little over the top? Were you perturbed by it or disturbed by it or irritated by it?

**JOHN WHITTINGDALE:**
No. I mean I’m a little surprised that the BBC expressed such disappointment at the green paper – firstly because, as you say, it’s simply a series of questions with no answers as yet decided. Secondly, I mean I produced a report as Chairman of the Select Committee in the last parliament which set the terms of this debate. We tried to ask the questions in that paper and the questions in the green paper are very similar. And the BBC welcomed the Select Committee report, so I was a little surprised that they didn’t feel able to welcome with the same degree of enthusiasm the green paper. As for the letter which was published by the various celebrities, actually most of that I fully agreed with. As I said, I admire the BBC. The last thing I want to do is undermine the BBC.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Can I ask about the sort of philosophical question which underlines all of this? On the one hand, there are people saying because of the licence fee and its history and its place in the national culture, the BBC must offer something for almost everyone, and if it does kind of celebrity stuff and The Voice and Strictly and so forth, which a lot of people reading the newspapers might not like themselves, it’s still very important that everybody gets something from the BBC. That’s one view. And then on the other side of the spectrum, as it were, there are those people who say no, no, it’s public service broadcasting paid for differently. It should be always distinctive. It’s really about market failure. Now those are the two extremes – I understand that – but where on that spectrum do you sit?

**JOHN WHITTINGDALE:**
Well I mean that is one of the questions which we posed in the green paper – this issue of universality: whether or not everybody should find something that they like on the BBC. I think that, as I mentioned before, I think the key test for the BBC should be distinctiveness. They should be looking at their programming, measuring it against what else is out there, but for public money to be used to finance public service programming I think it needs to be distinct from the commercial sector and that is something which I think the BBC have long accepted. It doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be popular. Many of the BBC’s programmes which are their most popular shows are equally clearly public service programming. The ideal outcome is that you have a programme which is both public service and gets a very high audience rating.

ANDREW MARR:
I suppose this is the question about distinctiveness. If you go all the way back to our childhoods and we think about something like The Generation Game, well with all due respect to Bruce Forsyth there was nothing terribly distinctive about that and yet it was very important to the BBC that so many people turned on on a Saturday night and watched it. So does your idea of distinctiveness still allow for mainstream middlebrow or lower kind of light entertainment on a Saturday night?

JOHN WHITTINGDALE:
Well I mean I think Saturday night has always been a time when families sit round the television and we traditionally have had sort of light entertainment shows, and in many ways Strictly Come Dancing is the sort of successor to The Generation Game. But Strictly was perhaps, you know at first sight of the commissioning editor, not necessarily a show which was going to be as successful as it’s proved to be. So I think the BBC there took a risk, it paid off well and it has achieved a mass audience, and that seems to me admirable if you can do all those things. But of course you know in the age when you and I were sitting watching The Generation Game, the amount of choice available was extremely limited. At that time there were probably only about three channels …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) It was that or football in the rain.
JOHN WHITTINGDALE:
… whereas now you’ve got fifty, sixty, seventy to choose from.

ANDREW MARR:
Can I move on to ask about another idea which has been floating around, which is that in due course, when it’s technically possible – which is not now – when you can turn on and off different parts of the BBC, there should be a kind of general BBC service for everyone paying the licence fee but also maybe a kind of BBC premium, an extra service which you can subscribe to, just as you subscribe to Sky or whatever, are you at all attracted by that?

JOHN WHITTINGDALE:
Well that’s an option. As you say, it’s not possible at the moment because to have a voluntary subscription you have to have a mechanism to turn off the people …

ANDREW MARR:
Sure.

JOHN WHITTINGDALE:
... who don’t want to subscribe to it and that’s not available to us in every home yet. It may come in time and at that time it is possible we could adopt a part-funded compulsory fee, part funded by subscription, but we’re not there yet. But we think it’s right that at least we should begin to think about that question and whether or not that is a direction which we might wish to move on in ten years’ time.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright, two other areas if I might. First of all, tough times – an austerity government, paying off the deficit, all of that. Are free national museums and galleries safe under this government?

JOHN WHITTINGDALE:
Yes. It was actually in the Conservative Party manifesto that we would maintain free entry to the national museums and that’s a policy that’s proved hugely successful. Visitor numbers have gone up enormously, it’s contributed to the fact that our tourism
industry is one of the most successful in the world. London is the most visited country in the world and one of the reasons people come to London is because of our extraordinary museums and culture.

ANDREW MARR:
Yeah hear, hear I might say to that. But moving onto one area not directly in your brief, but you are in the cabinet, the Prime Minister has been talking in America about ISIS and the Islamist threat to this country and what’s going to happen in Syria, and talks of the need to come back and “get the House of Commons behind me”. Does that mean that we’re going to see another debate and a vote on our work in Syria and elsewhere coming shortly, do you think?

JOHN WHITTINGDALE:
Well that’s a matter for the Prime Minister as to when he wishes to come back to parliament. He’s made it very clear that if we were to take military action against ISIS in Syria, then that would require the approval of parliament and that he would want to consult parliament first. I entirely understand that we are in the middle of a battle against people who have a completely different ideology and are a severe threat to us and that is why we are there, but it has to be a matter where parliament gives its approval if we are to take any further military action and the Prime Minister has made that clear from the start.

ANDREW MARR:
Do you think we have been too gentle, too namby-pamby, too politically correct about non-violent but radical Islamism in this country?

JOHN WHITTINGDALE:
Well I mean I think that there is a threat from extremism in this country. In some cases people have adopted terrorism and clearly we need to crack down on that. But it isn’t just enough to fight the terrorists; we have to fight the ideology that is motivating them as well. And this is a matter which I know that the Prime Minister is going to address in quite an important speech tomorrow and I shall want to hear what he has to say as much as I’m sure you will.
ANDREW MARR:
Absolutely. John Whittingdale, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

INTERVIEW ENDS