AM: The BBC, the Dyson Report, Martin Bashir and Princess Diana. You might have assumed we would have a voice from the BBC itself to respond to all the unanswered questions. You might have expected that. So did we. But, as it turns out, no dice. Instead I’ve been speaking to Dame Esther Rantzen who knew the Princess well at the time and was also one of the BBC’s most famous faces and I began by asking her if she agrees with Earl Spencer that a direct line can be drawn from that Martin Bashir interview to the breakdown of the Princesses marriage and then to her death.

ER: I think it’s understandable but I don’t think it is fair. What we have to remember is that three years previously Diana had collaborated with the book, you know, what was really an autobiography talking about her suffering and her private life. She had spoken to other people, for example Jenny Bond, saying more or less exactly what she said in that interview. They were separated at the time of the interview, Prince Charles and she were and I think they had made each other very, very unhappy. For evidence, one only has to look at the passionate and enduring relationship, the love affair that became a marriage between Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall. So I think they would certainly have divorced. I also think that the tragic death was due to the ferocious pursuit by the press and paparazzi.

AM: You knew her during the course of this period when she was, as it were, the quarry. What do you remember about the pressure on her at the time yourself?

ER: Well, I remember no paranoia. I think paranoia is a term people usually use for people that invent persecution or have delusions of it. What I saw was a woman who was carrying on
working. I knew her because for example she launched Child Line’s 10th Birthday Appeal. So what I saw was a talented, determined young woman, really in her prime in her mid 30s.

AM: So I think one of the big puzzles in all of this, Esther, is the rehiring of Martin Bashir in 2016 after there had been lots of arguments about his previous work. What’s your explanation of that?

ER: Well, in 2020 hindsight very useful. Of course what the BBC was dealing with the results of the internal inquiry which had said he was honourable and honest and given that verdict you couldn’t very well say well we can’t employ him in any role because it was Tony Hall, who I think is honourable and honest and therefore tends to see it in other people who had come to that conclusion, and he had become Director General. So it was difficult to gainsay. But I do think there are other people who need to be asking questions and one of them is Lord Birt, John Birt, because he was Director General at the time this interview was being prepared and transmitted and loads of the checks and balances that John Birt was brought into the BBC to put onto BBC journalism didn’t seem to have been used in order to protect the BBC from experiencing what I call ‘scoop frenzy.’

AM: Now so far, and I say so far, the only people who’ve lost their jobs inside the BBC over all of this have been whistleblowers. Do you think that’s right?

ER: It happens so often. It happens in the health service, it happens in all these big organisations and I was talking to Nick Ross who has a very interesting role on one of the big health authorities. He is the Freedom to Speak Out Guardian and he’s a non executive. In other words he’s even higher than the most senior executives and if there are people who want to whistle blow they have Guardians at their level who then alert him and he takes it as high as it will go. Now one of the awful things about this story is Steve Hewlett who actually ran the BBC’s Media Show
and was widely regarded in his later life as a journalist actually more or less sacked the two whistle blowers who came to see him, made sure they didn't stay on Panorama. When in fact of course he should have taken what they said higher up the organisation and obviously what they said should have gone to the Board of Governors and it never did.

AM: Looking back on what’s happened, do you think the BBC needs to change?
ER: Well I do think having a Freedom to Speak Out Guardian on whatever the highest level of governance in, what it’s in Ofcom or whether it’s within the BBC, it has to be above and separate from the executive, because what I call 'spook syndrome,' which I’ve experienced and I’m sure you’ve experienced, when all common sense and judgement goes out the window and you just pound after your prey can blind you to some of the issues. And the person who says no in any office is always the least popular. So it has to be someone right up in the stratosphere of the BBC that does that.

AM: Esther, you have seen and worked for the BBC in good times and in less good times. This is clearly a terrible, terrible morning for the BBC. Do you think this one’s going to blow over?
ER: Eh, yes, I do. I hope so and I think it should, because in the end of the day I believe the Princess of Wales said what she wanted to say to a very wide audience who therefore understood a great deal more about her suffering and why in the end she left the Royal family. And I see the same syndrome happening in the next generation and I think the BBC needs to continue to report fairly, unsensationally and keep a cool head even when the brit bats are flying. Because the BBC is much bigger than this.

AM: Cool head all round. Dame Esther Rantzen thanks so much for talking to us.
Ends