ANDREW MARR: 
Now as the weather le… - water levels, I beg your pardon - continue to rise, various careers appear to be in almost as much danger as those houses on the Somerset levels. Chris Smith, Labour Peer and Chair of the Environment Agency, has been lambasted on all fronts. Owen Paterson, Environment Secretary and bete noire of the good folk of Somerset, has now withdrawn from the scene for an eye operation. Step forward Eric Pickles who’s been put in charge of the Government’s flood response. Welcome Communities Secretary.

ERIC PICKLES: 
Nice to be here.

ANDREW MARR: 
Is the Environment Agency fit for purpose?

ERIC PICKLES: 
Yeah, of course it’s fit for purpose. It may have made some misjudgements, but right now the men and women of the Environment Agency are working round the clock doing some fantastic jobs in shoring up our defences and are offering advice. But
there have been I think some suggestions of perhaps the advice on the Somerset levels weren’t as good as it could have been.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Is it well led, do you think?

**ERIC PICKLES:**
I think there are parts that are well led. I think it’s important now to sort of get about the process of repairing the damage, assessing the future, and pretty soon we’ll have some new leadership towards the turn of the year.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Do you think it needs to refocus, to operate slightly differently?

**ERIC PICKLES:**
I think it needs to recognise that one solution is not appropriate. And we’ve been talking a little bit about dredging. Now dredging might be appropriate for the Somerset levels, but it isn’t appropriate everywhere. You need to look at the east coast round the bottom of Essex. There are a number where the flooding of meadows there has proved to be remarkably effective.

**ANDREW MARR:**
They’ve also said let’s protect houses, not farmland, and town not country, and that’s something you’ve criticised.

**ERIC PICKLES:**
I don’t think it’s a binary choice. I mean clearly we need to be able … we want to protect people. We want to protect people and make them feel safe in their homes. But also there’s important farmland there and we want to ensure that it’s there to grow crops, we want it to be there to be part of a vibrant rural economy. So I never think it’s going to be a straight choice. I think somebody very wisely wrote last week just because we can’t protect everything, it doesn’t mean that we can’t protect everyone.

**ANDREW MARR:**
It has a huge budget, a massive workforce. A lot of people think far too much is being
spent on bureaucracy in this agency and not enough on the frontline services.

**ERIC PICKLES:**
Well it's the biggest in Europe …

**ANDREW MARR:**
Yeah.

**ERIC PICKLES:**
… and it is actually bigger than the United States Environment Agency. But a relatively small sum compared to its budget, I think roughly just short of half its budget goes on staffing, and I think they only spent about £20 million on cleaning …….?? and the like.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Which is a very strange way of kind of organising their budgets, you might think.

**ERIC PICKLES:**
Well I’m sure now they’ll be reassessing.

**ANDREW MARR:**
You’ve said that you won’t wear a ‘Save Chris Smith’ t-shirt. Do you think he should go?

**ERIC PICKLES:**
That’s a matter for him. I don’t think I should give him …

**ANDREW MARR:**
A gentle nudge?

**ERIC PICKLES:**
I don’t think I should nudge him out.
ANDREW MARR:
Alright. Okay can I turn back to the question of what’s going on in Somerset because the Government … I mean Chris Smith’s been criticised a lot. The Government itself was warned several times by different farmers and agencies a year ago, or last summer certainly, that dredging was needed, and on each occasion the letter was refused … you know a refusal came back saying no, we don’t need to do this. So the Government itself is responsible as well, isn’t it?

ERIC PICKLES:
Oh we made a mistake, there’s no doubt about that, and we perhaps have relied too much on the Environment Agency’s advice. I think we recognise now that we should have done … we should have dredged, and I think it’s important now we get on the process of getting those people back into their houses once we’re able to really do some serious pumping. At the moment the level’s too high to do that.

ANDREW MARR:
So don’t you think that ministers, including the Prime Minister’s office, should apologise to people like Edwin White, the farmer, who said “You need to dredge now”?

ERIC PICKLES:
Well I’ll apologise. I’ll apologise unreservedly and I’m really sorry that we took the advice on what we thought we were dealing with experts.

ANDREW MARR:
Right, but they weren’t experts. And what about the dredging now? There’s three million coming in for extra money for dredging. Is that right?

ERIC PICKLES:
There is … Yes, I think … I wouldn’t be tied down to the exact amount.

ANDREW MARR:
But there’ll be plenty of money for dredging and dredging is now going to carry on so far as the eye can see in terms of the Somerset levels, not elsewhere.
ERIC PICKLES:
Well they were put together, weren’t they, by … It was manmade. It was an intent part of the process that dredging should take place.

ANDREW MARR:
It was medieval monks originally doing it, but we’ve got better.

ERIC PICKLES:
Well you’ve got better information than me. (Marr laughs) I didn’t realise the Marr Show had been around for quite such a long time, but I’ll take your word for that.

ANDREW MARR:
Yes, okay. Can we talk about climate change more generally because the head of the relevant quango has said that this is probably caused by climate change. Do you agree with that?

ERIC PICKLES:
He said probably.

ANDREW MARR:
Probably, yes.

ERIC PICKLES:
And I had an opportunity of listening to experts, and after a little while it became pretty clear to me that from a very educated point of view nobody really knows. And to a degree, I don’t think it matters whether it’s climate change or whether it’s part of the cycle that we normally see within weather. We’ve got to deal with the consequences. And as the attention this week starts to expand from the South West, we’ll be putting in transport, we’ll be trying to get the South West going again. As we move towards the middle of next week, the Thames Valley is likely to see some significant flooding.

ANDREW MARR:
I suppose the reason the climate change issue might matter is if it is climate change then we’re going to have ten or twenty or thirty or forty years ahead of extreme weather and, therefore, we have to think very carefully now about new kinds of defences, new kinds of transport protection and so forth.

ERIC PICKLES:
Well I think what we’ve got to do is we’ve got to ensure that there is good protection around strategic infrastructure - pumping stations, water, electric generation, major transport infrastructure - and we’re in the process of making our infrastructure as sustainable as possible.

ANDREW MARR:
Protecting our infrastructure and farmland and some of the towns and so forth is going to be hugely expensive. Do you think it’s still a good idea to spend £50 billion on HS2 at a time when the entire South West of the country is now cut off by train?

ERIC PICKLES:
Well I mean we have to understand that if we don’t increase the capacity on that line, if we were to sort of …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) To Birmingham?

ERIC PICKLES:
… up to Birmingham, up the whole west coast, then we will be looking at having to prop up a Victorian railway, we’ll be looking at twenty or thirty years of disruption. Now what we’re looking at in the South West is to get the trains going as quickly as possible. In the meantime, we’re putting on extra buses. We’ve been able to increase the flow of aircraft. We’ve put on a bigger service, we’re putting on bigger planes, and we’re going to try and ensure that the South West can get on with the process of normal life.

ANDREW MARR:
Do you have any sense at all - I know there’s been all these cabinet meetings, these
emergency meetings going on - any sense at all of how long it’ll take to reconnect the South West to the rest of the country by train?

**ERIC PICKLES:**
Well it much depends on what’s happening at large. You saw the size on Brunel’s, just that wonderful stretch of railway, that sort of monstrous gap there, but we’ll try and get it up as quick as possible. But in the meantime …

**ANDREW MARR:**
But this is going to be a running political sore. I mean if it’s still not you know connected in a year’s time, there’ll be a lot of people in the South West absolutely livid with the Government.

**ERIC PICKLES:**
I don’t think there’s any suggestion it’s going to take a year to …

**ANDREW MARR:**
I was only throwing that out as a helpful suggestion.

**ERIC PICKLES:**
Well that's not my idea of being helpful, but there we are.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Alright. Coming back to the question of long-term strategy, do you think that there are going to be parts of the country we cannot afford to protect; that parts of the coastland - perhaps in East Anglia and so on - it's just too expensive?

**ERIC PICKLES:**
Well, as you know, through the top of Norfolk and Suffolk we’re seeing movements over the sanctuaries. Some villages have completely disappeared.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Yeah.
ERIC PICKLES:
And of course there are parts of, particularly the top of Norfolk, that were thriving medieval ports that are now land bound. So that kind of thing is always going to go on. But in terms of giving up major amounts of our country to the sea, well no of course not.

ANDREW MARR:
You’ll fight then on the beaches as it were?

ERIC PICKLES:
We’ll fight them in the Fens.

ANDREW MARR:
Fight them in the Fens, very good. And you’ll fight them along the Thames as well, which is presumably now the new source of concern.

ERIC PICKLES:
Yeah, well the Thames of course is a slow rising river and it also goes down rather slowly, but we anticipate all those water mains at the top are now pretty full and it’s going to work its way down. Now already people are out talking to householders about what they can do. Part of that, of course traditionally there’s been quite a lot of flooding in the past, so people are quite well adapted to it, but we’ll ensure that pumping stations, electricity generation, major infrastructure for transport and rail are protected as we speak.

ANDREW MARR:
Sitting in those meetings, are you now completely happy and convinced the Government has finally got control over this, you know what you’re doing?

ERIC PICKLES:
Anybody who thinks they can control the weather is of the King Canute/Knut style. But I mean the problem is it’s not so much how bad the storms have been. They’ve
been bad, but it’s a cumulative effect, one after another.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Because one of the things that’s being said is that local authorities have simply not had the resources. They’ve been under the cosh financially hugely for a long period of time and they’ve been having to make terribly difficult decisions between libraries and so forth.

**ERIC PICKLES:**
No, no, local authorities should have no problem about this. We’ve changed … It’s controlled by a thing called the Belwin rules. I’ve changed the threshold.

**ANDREW MARR:**
So more money can come in to do this?

**ERIC PICKLES:**
Absolutely. It’s pretty well established, no one is being constrained. We’ve talked to local authorities continuously through that, and I have to say they’ve been doing a fantastic job and I have to say so have individual councillors who’ve often been right there at the water’s edge taking care of their constituents.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Do you think that Mark Harper, the immigration minister, really had to go?

**ERIC PICKLES:**
I was really sad to see Mark go. He was a terrifically strong minister. And had he been a member of the public, then I don’t think he would have done anything wrong, but he set himself a very high standard and he failed that standard and therefore honourably stood down.

**ANDREW MARR:**
If a minister can get into that kind of fankle, don’t you think almost anybody can get into that kind of fankle, and, therefore, the new legislation may be too tough?
ERIC PICKLES:
The new legislation is reasonably light touch. If this had been a member of the public, they would have done nothing wrong.

ANDREW MARR:
Eric Pickles, for now thank you very much indeed.

ERIC PICKLES:
Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS