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File: **LR001111-001 - JOHN FULTON**
Duration: **0:29:39**
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START AUDIO

[0:00:39]

John Fulton: The independence argument had been sustained on the old basis of what I call the dedication, the purpose, the manifest nature of the objective, which was accepted, and encapsulated within an organisation which you owed your whole loyalty to. I mean your whole occupational loyalty was to this body. You didn't have part-time jobs. It was- this was- you sank or swam with this as your career, and not many people ran away from it.

Then you get the other, and you have to say, "Now, what is the substitute for this? What is the claim you now make for hands-off?" Because we are a creative institution, and Greene felt this very strongly, that your creative chaps, especially in the artistic field, or in the scholarly field, have to be left- You can't put them into straitjackets. You can't mortify them by fleshly limits and so on. You've really got to let them have their head.

Now, this is right and any chap who came from my background recognised a kindred spirit in that. But what goes out of the window with this is the argument about how do you defend your independence. And I think that Greene's argument about that was that well, these are professional people and he was, I suppose, onto a pretty clear and fairly generally accepted doctrine that professional people, by which you mean lawyers, doctors and, up to a point, certain kinds of scholars and

academics and so on, can be left to themselves because they have got this ethical base to their professionalism.

This must have been true of the early people in broadcasting. It was true of a considerable number of those who survived into the new era. But of course it was not so- I mean it wasn't that they were unethical but the development of their own thing was not in the same category as the pursuit of his own thing by the doctor, with its oath and its trust [issue 0:03:31], the trustee relationship between the patient and the doctor.

This had no counterpart. There wasn't one profession of broadcasting. There were a multitude of specialist loyalties and not all of them would rank as the kind of professional occupation which, by being professional, was entitled to a very large measure of autonomy. And so I think that this makes you say, "Now, what would have restored the kind of public accountability which could be reconciled with the spontaneity of creative service or a scholarly service?"

I mean in the sense that the news has got to be right. It's got to be exact. You have got to have a vocabulary which distinguishes between fact and opinion. This is a tremendous discipline. How do you bring it about that this is done? And I think this is the thing that sticks in my mind as being the big question, nagging on in my mind, if people come at you, and people did a bit. I mean I don't think- there was surprisingly little of it. You asked me this before, and I think there was surprisingly little of it.

I certainly was never made the target of the political chaps. You've got academic colleagues who said, "Oh yes," you know, "this is not the genuine thing. I mean these chaps are more superficial than we are, [whatever 0:05:34]." But I suppose the kind of professional prototype that you think about in talking about this kind of subject is C P Scott saying, "Look,

you must distinguish between fact and opinion. Facts are sacred and opinion is free." And he sat up at night in his office, seeing that the language was scrupulously observing the implications of that dictum. This was a tremendous self-discipline.

Now, you'd brought in, into the world of broadcasting, especially with the entertainment world and so on, a variety of people who would not respond to that particular challenge. You'd got others who would, but it was overall- I mean the interesting thing about the disc jockey is that his discipline was not one in which he would recognise the limits of what he was competent about. He would think that anything that came within the realm of his patter when he was doing his stuff was fair comment, because he hadn't been through a rigorous training that C P Scott would have put his office boys through and everybody else.

So that I think the question then becomes, "Now, what is your strategical answer to this?" Now, all I can bring myself to think about in this is what I know about. I mean what happened in universities? There you'd got some of the same problems. Nothing like so complicated. You'd got technicians as well as professors and lecturers. You had got office workers and you had got porters. You had a great number of people helping to run the life of a university and make it go, and they are awfully important, but they are not all governed by professional consciences and we are learning this of course every day to our cost, that loyalties are partial inside great services, like health services, limited. How do you make it cohere?

And I think that what stuck me about the university thing was that imperfectly these people were all included, very imperfectly. But the element of the university on which it staked its independence was brought together not to answer

the challenge of a Pilkington or a Beveridge or whatever it is, an Annan enquiry from outside, but was brought together to say to itself every five years, “We’ve got to get our five-year grant.”

And we can’t get it without sitting down and saying, “What should it be? What should we ask for? What should be the character of our programme that would justify us in putting it forward and claiming it and saying this is not something we are going to haggle over. This is something that we have thought out was sweated out.” Some people have had to give up very cherished things. I mean the future of their young men, you know, by saying this is no longer the growing point and for the next ten years, because you had to look forward ten years in order to be able to do it for five, that, “This is where we ought to be going. This is what scholarship demands, the relationship of one set of fields of enquiry to another, and this is what the social responsibilities of the university demand that we should do.”

And we would go forward with this and we would stand firm and we would expect the body that is a buffer between us and the state to, no doubt to be very scrupulous about its cross-examination of what we are claiming, but also then to fight the government on our behalf. If they couldn’t shake us in our conviction that we’d put forward the right mixture, not just the result of certain forces of personality or vested interest or whatever it might be, and not just within a little more growth in every department because, by some strange freak, we have got it right the last time and a little more must be also right for this one.

You would never get away with that. And now that was the role of the DG of the university, the vice-chancellor, to see to it that the shape of the thing, the shape of the thing which involves all

these complicated series of relationships between subjects, between the teaching requirements, the research requirements, the national requirements, the international company of your brethren all over the world, all these things have been faced and that, unless you face this, he will be in an impossible position in his defence, which lies on his shoulders, when it comes to the next stage.

And the body would be, the buffer body would be stuck in its defence when it comes to the moment when it has to be justified at a Cabinet meeting as a claim from the higher educational system against the claims of broadcasting, against the claims of the hospital services, against the claims of the roads and the claims of national defence, with limited resources. And there you've got- you pull it together, you pull it together.

Now, I don't believe somehow that- and this may be a very naïve view, I think, because the analogies are always very difficult about this sort of thing. It is not very naïve but it may be naïve, but I think that- I don't believe that Beveridge, Pilkington, Annan, people from outside, are the right people to do this job every ten years. It may be that broadcasting needs a longer cast than the universities. That is open to discussion.

But I think somehow what I missed, and I think I still would find it missing, would be a setting aside of everything else, that is to say the ordinary business of running this vast establishment, and saying, "Now, here are our great problems. What are we going to do about them?" And, "We must have a great debate." And, "We will go on and sort it out." The contributions of the part-timers have got to be weighed with those of the chaps who are here all the time, the various branches, the engineers, and the telly people and the radio people.

And we must ask what we are giving to the public and what the public needs from us. It seems to me that this raises enormous questions about leadership, or what we call leadership. It is manifest that you have got these great areas of expertise, pinpointed by the McKinsey report, and the importance of hiving off their administration and their managerial responsibilities to identifiable people in each of the great areas: finance, engineering, radio, television, news, and giving managerial responsibilities commensurate with the divisions and responsibilities of those divisions in their respective spheres.

That is agreed, that there is experience of that elsewhere. I mean I think you've got to face the fact that in the universities, although it used to be the prerogative of the arts faculties to find vice-chancellors, it is no longer so. More than half of the present vice-chancellors committee are scientists or applied scientists and the universities have enormously gained by that fact.

But the role of the DG, the vice-chancellor-come-DG role that I am talking about, is a mysterious thing in a way. The professor, the best professor is not because he is the best professor necessarily the right vice-chancellor. You have got people running very large departments with great sums of money, in their research and teaching programmes involved, and the administration of these is not something that the university vice-chancellor necessarily wants to poke about and interfere with.

And the experience of the last 50 years I think would bear out that some of the best administration in universities is done in these baronies within universities which are great scientific departments. But the attitude in which you have been brought up to look at this as your [___0:16:30] and its promotion as

your responsibility has to be, has to have added to it another quality if you are going to be the agent of coherence and the stimulator of corporate responsibility for the whole, and that this has no- There is no blueprint for this, but it is a function that has to be performed, otherwise I think the independence of the corporation, or whichever body one is talking about, is threatened, is going to be threatened.

It's this capacity to speak as a- stand up for one another and stand by decisions taken in solemn conclave about what is the necessary next step of development, which is evoked to some extent by the role of the director general, vice-chancellor kind of person. That seems to me to be crucial in defending, or fending off, the threats from outside to the creative activity of the body.

0:17:44

Interviewer: And in your time did the BBC have the right people?

John Fulton: And on the whole, on reflection, I think the defence that was offered by Greene, having said all that I want to say in praise of his opening the windows, wasn't really the valid one, namely that these are professional people. I don't believe that that could be the final answer. The final answer had to come out of some act of corporate responsibility, of which he had to be the stimulant, but he had to win the wholehearted agreement of the other managers and to have it transmitted down.

I mean participation is terribly important here, otherwise you'll get a disaffected three quarters of your- who don't care. I mean who are out to pursue something else and who don't feel responsible in the way that is the only way that matters. So

that it seems to me that really what one is coming down to is saying that you're not looking for a better man but you are looking for a particular kind of man. I mean the best professor can be ruined by being made into a vice-chancellor. I mean as a great scientist, whatever he might be.

Interviewer: I know.

John Fulton: And that this is an error. And so it seems to me we go back to the question of where do you find, and this accounts for the fact that I- I mentioned it in Hill's book as saying I thought we ought not to exclude looking outside because the thing is not done by closing your eyes to the possibilities that you may not have the person who is going best to flourish in this role, thereby making his institution flourish, that he is best at the more specialised job and ought to be kept in that. So that it seemed to me that to find this person is where the- is really, if it comes up in their time, the individual's time, the most important thing that the board of governors have to do, to get this one right.

Interviewer: Now, you had to choose a director general in your time.

John Fulton: Yes.

0:20:23

Interviewer: Do you think you made the right decision?

John Fulton: Well, I think granted that it was to be from within, because that was- I think it was ruled out that we should look outside, as they did with Ogilvie, for instance, and no doubt a precedent that didn't endear people to their idea. But Jacob came from outside, didn't he? I mean he-

Interviewer: Well, he had been in the BBC for a while.

John Fulton: Yes, yes. But-

Interviewer: He'd had four years at the BBC.

John Fulton: He'd had four years. But I think that we- granted that we were choosing from inside, I think on the whole that they did the right thing. I don't think it was the happiest of choices because I remember very well this young man, younger man then, was interviewed along- not all on the same day, but along with Noel Annan for the [Scougham 0:21:34] job, but he didn't want it, and he was looking for something else. He was then secretary of the governors and people spoke very highly of him and of course he's a man of very great ability.

This is not what we're talking about. The question is whether he was a professor or whether he was vice-chancellor and this is [something to think about 0:22:03]. Now, I don't believe that what I saw of him made me feel very confident that he had the real vice-chancellorial, director general qualities that I've been describing as the right defence in the long haul of the independence of the BBC, being in front of the outsider in seeing what the problems were, in being in front of the external

audit of a Pilkington or a Beveridge or an Annon, in proposing the next stages, being in front of the other bodies in seeing the outward reach of the BBC and being aware of it and being constantly reminding his colleagues of what was needed, what the outside world was in need of. That is his role.

I mean it is an enormously important part of it, as well as interpreting the inside chaps to the world at large. I don't think that's the chairman of governor's role. I don't think that can be, because he doesn't really have it in his blood. I mean he doesn't really necessarily have it in his blood, because the chairman will never have been inside the BBC, or very, very rarely.

So that I think this is- the model is this and I think that, in so far as I've set out to say what I can say about the directors general that I have known, I think I have said it.

Interviewer: I want to change the subject completely if we could-

John Fulton: Yes.

0:23:59

Interviewer: Because you were unique among the governors as having a kind of personal relationship and a personal access to the prime minister of the day. And you therefore had some idea of how he viewed broadcasting, how he viewed the BBC, and maybe there were some problems which you had to cope with. We are talking about Harold Wilson. And I wondered if you would just talk a bit about Harold and how you dealt with him and his attitude to broadcasting.

John Fulton: Well, it's a less romantic or even highlighted story than one might suppose. I didn't know him at Oxford until he'd finished his undergraduate career, in the way that I knew Ted Heath, who I had taught for four years, or Jenkins or Healey, because he belonged to another college. But of course I became- we were very- we worked very closely together when- he had been working with Beveridge on research into, not the Beveridge plan. That was Frank Pakenham's role later on, but with Beveridge on the history of prices.

And he was taught by a colleague of mine at Balliol who at introduced him to me at one stage, at the very end of his undergraduate career. And when Andrew Duncan, who was my minister, for whom I had enormous regard, went round the coalfields and found that he could never get the answer to the question why the coal output was going up, because the figures were two months in getting made up. The Department of Mines was not very- one of the livewires of Whitehall.

He said to me, "We must get somebody who will help." I said, "Well, there is a young man working for Beveridge who is a very good statistician. He got the George Webb Medley scholarship at Oxford." And Duncan said, "How old is he?" I said, "Oh, I suppose 24." And he said, "Why is he not in the army?" I think Duncan had lost his son at this stage. And he grumbled away about that, but then, in the end, he said, "Well, let's see him."

And then an enormous development took place. On Saturday Duncan went off to Broadway armed with statistical tables of the whole of his jurisdiction for energy supplies, industrial coal supplies, domestic coal supplies, transport coal supplies, all you could think of, electricity, gas. And it was, as you might say and as you would know, I mean that you had to be building

up stocks from March to October, otherwise you are going to run short in the winter when the bombing came and the bad weather came and so on, and the nation would have a three-day week and then the old man would blow his top. There would be heads flying and so on.

So Duncan went off and on Monday he came back and said, “I notice that we’re behind in our target.” Let’s suppose that this is a May meeting. “Building up gas stocks or electricity stocks or railway stocks by .2 million since last week. Why?” Oh, well, the answer was because the Ministry of Transport actually wouldn’t provide the wagons. “Oh, wouldn’t they? Get me Leathers on the telephone.” “Leathers, do you know that when the old man says, ‘Why are we losing the war?’ next winter, I shall have to say, ‘It’s that fellow, Leathers,’ you know.”

Got it put right, so that he was- And he lost his heart to this. He said, “Do you know? I’ve met statisticians who have got dizzy when they came to the number 10, or didn’t get dizzy until they came to the number 10, and I’ve met those who are correlation merchants, Cambridge mathematicians. Here is a fellow who can understand the economic- the administrative implications of a statistic and brings them out.” And he made his job. So they became devoted to one another and this was a great- he had an enormous gift.

So we worked together through all this and I knew him well. He has this self-encircling reserve, I think, about- he obviously has intimate friends, but not many people would- and I wasn’t an intimate friend. I mean his wife and he came to stay with us in Oxford one weekend, but otherwise we’ve had no social, ever had any social intercourse.

END AUDIO