

Transcript of BBC Radio 4, 'Today', Interview with Michael Grade, 26 August 2020, 7.44am

[*Music: Land of Hope and Glory*]

MISHAL HUSAIN: Yes, to the Last Night of the Proms once again, which the BBC now says will be back in full-sung choral fashion next year. This time, *Land of Hope and Glory* and *Rule Britannia* will be heard in the orchestral versions only, the BBC says, because of COVID, critics say, because there was a crisis of confidence over lyrics about Briton's never being slaves at a time of new urgency on Black Lives Matter and race. Next week, a new Director General, Tim Davie, will take over from Tony Hall. The Conservative peer, Michael Grade is on the line, a former BBC Chairman. Good morning, Lord Grade.

LORD GRADE: Morning.

MH: First of all, do you believe that there were qualms at the BBC about these lyrics, particularly those of *Rule Britannia*?

LG: Well, obviously, there were. The key thing is I would defend the BBC's right to make these (*word unclear, audio cut-out*) decisions, and therefore defend their right to make the most ghastly mistake, which they have done in this case, which shows how out of touch they are with their audience.

MH: That's what . . . that's what you believe this shows?

LG: Yes, definitely.

MH: Okay. Sorry, the line's not great to you, but I'm going to persevere with it, in the hope it gets better. I mean, the reason I asked you whether you believe that there was a crisis of confidence or qualms about these lyrics is because publicly the BBC has repeatedly said that . . . that the planned change to the programme was because of COVID restrictions?

LG: Fine. And it's still a mistake. That doesn't make it right. But again, I would defend their right to make the decision free of political interference. But it is a mistake. It's clearly a mistake. I mean, it's just . . . it's just idiotic.

MH: Even this year, and even though it will be back to normal next year, we're told?

LG: Yeah. So we weren't . . . they weren't sure about that when they made the announcement about this year. They weren't clear that they were going to restore it next year. So there's been a lot of shuffling in the corridors at the BBC.

MH: Yes. But I suppose no one can be absolutely sure what next year is going to be . . . going to be like, at this point. And the point . . .

LG: (*inaudible*)

MH: . . . the point that Tony Hall was making yesterday about . . . about creativity and what you can do artistically, it will be a very different i— . . . you know, proposition and reality, that empty Albert Hall, no Promers singing along in the way that we're used to.

LG: There is no question that the decision, although it may be justified on artistic grounds, does have cultural and other significan— . . . and political significance, which they rather either ignore, or didn't understand, or were just getting themselves into a complete muddle over.

MH: But then what would your advice be to the incoming Director General, Tim Davie, who's taking over at a time like this with a critical and sometimes hostile government, at a time when we've got debates about race in this country as never before?

LG: Well, let's put this into context. I don't think the Albert Hall decision is that significant. It's just an indication of the BBC's (*word unclear, audio cut-out*) that they are out of touch, really, with the rest of the country. They've shown that time and again over Brexit, over the coverage of Brexit. They missed the big swing at the election. They're too trapped, the journalists at the BBC are too trapped in the Westminster bubble.

MH: So your advice to the new Director General then, about the course he needs to chart?

LG: Well, the big question is, what's the future for Public Service Broadcasting? And Tim Davies is a fine executive who will serve the BBC very, very well indeed, I have no doubt. But what we need to do is to take a long, hard look and come up with a definition and a role for the BBC of Public Service Broadcasting, which reflect the very different (*word unclear, audio cut-out*) the remit of the BBC (*word unclear, audio cut-out 'hasn't'?*) really changed in a hundred years, it really is time for a review of Public Service Broadcasting and for Tim, Tim and the BBC, to make the case for the licence fee and for Public Service Broadcasting going forward.

MH: Michael Grade, Lord Grade. Thank you very much and apologies to everyone for the line dipping in and out a little there.