

TLD 2025 – Document 1

The famous Paxman-Michael Howard interview – BBC Newsnight archives (1997)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqU77I40mS0>

1 (00:00 Jeremy Paxman [JP]) Er, Mr Howard, do you condemn these stories about flowers and
2 dinners and chocolates?

3 (00:05 Michael Howard [MH]) Yes, and they do not come from my campaign team. Let me
4 make that absolutely clear. And my understanding is that the journalist who wrote the **story** ⁽¹⁾
5 in the *Daily Mail* to which you have referred has confirmed that he did not speak to anyone in
6 or near my campaign team before he wrote that article.

7 (00:23 JP) Clearly, they came from somebody sympathetic to you, though.

8 (00:26 MH) Well, not necessarily at all. I've no idea who they came from. If you look at the
9 article as a whole, it's not a particularly sympathetic piece.

10 (00:32 JP) Would you agree that such stories are cheap and nasty and bring shame on anyone
11 who spreads them?

12 (00:37 MH) I don't think we should be wasting anybody's time talking about stories like that.
13 I don't think they should ever have appeared in the public prints and I don't think we should
14 waste our time talking about them. There are serious issues to be discussed, er, since they've
15 been raised, about the dismissal of Derek Lewis as head of the prison service, a decision which
16 I had to take in the light of an independent report, not mentioned in, er, your introduction, which
17 came to the conclusion that there were inexcusable weaknesses in the management of the prison
18 service from top to bottom.

19 (01:07 JP) Why did you bawl out Ann Widdecombe for sending flowers in what she calls a
20 Christian gesture to Mrs Lewis?

21 (01:13 MH) I didn't, as she indeed has just confirmed.

22 (01:16 JP) She said you were extremely –

23 (01:18 MH) She said I didn't bawl her out.

24 (01:20 JP) She said – I – she objected to the words “bawl out” but she said you were, er,
25 extremely, er, agitated about it.

26 (01:26 MH) I – I thought it was an inappropriate thing to do given that I had just dismissed Mrs
27 Lewis's husband, but I hope we're not going to spend this interview talking about flowers and
28 things like that.

29 (01:35 JP) Er, Mr Howard, have you ever lied in any public statement?

30 (01:39 MH) Certainly not. I gave a very full account of the dismissal of Derek Lewis to the
31 House of Commons select committee and to the House of Commons itself in a debate that took
32 place. There can have been few decisions that have been subjected to more close and minute
33 scrutiny in recent years than that decision. It was a de–, it was a decision that it was necessary
34 for me to take after terrorists had escaped from Whitemoore. Other dangerous prisoners had

35 escaped from Parkhurst and an independent report had found that there were serious weaknesses
36 in the management of the prison service from top to bottom.

37 (02:16 JP) Is there anything you would wish to change about your statement to the House of
38 Commons or any other public statement you made about this matter?

39 (02:25 MH) No, nothing.

40 [(02:25 JP) Not a word?]

41 (02:26 MH) I gave a full account, er, of what had happened in relation to my decision.

42 (02:32 JP) Right. Er, can you help us with this, then? Er, you stated in your statement, er, that,
43 er, “the leader of the opposition had said, er, that, er, “I”, that is you, “personally told Mr Lewis
44 the governor of Parkhurst should be suspended immediately, that when Mr Lewis objected as
45 it was an operational matter, I threatened to instruct him to do it.” Derek Lewis says, “Howard
46 had certainly told me that the governor of Parkhurst should be suspended and had threatened to
47 overrule me.” Are you saying Mr Lewis is lying?

48 (03:00 MH) **I have given a full account** ⁽²⁾ of this and the position is what I told the House of
49 Commons, and let me tell you what the position is –

50 (03:06 JP) So you are saying that Mr Lewis lied?

51 (03:08 MH) Le–, let me tell you exactly what the position is. I was entitled to be consulted,
52 [(03:12 JP) Yes] and I was consulted. **I was entitled to express an opinion; I did express an**
53 **opinion** ⁽³⁾. I was not entitled to instruct Derek Lewis what to do and I did not instruct him what
54 to do [(03:25 JP Well, he spoke –)], and you will understand and recall that Mr Marriott was
55 not suspended. He was moved, and Derek Lewis told the Select Committee of the House of
56 Commons that it was his opinion, Derek Lewis’s opinion, that he should be moved immediately.
57 That is what happened.

58 (03:42 JP) Mr Lewis says, “I”, that is Mr Lewis, “told him what we had decided about Marriott
59 and why he”, that is you, “exploded”. “Simply moving the governor was politically unpalatable.
60 It sounded indecisive. It would be seen as a fudge if I did not change my mind and suspend
61 Marriott, he would have to consider overruling me.” [(04:01 MH) Mr Marriott –] (04:02 JP)
62 You can’t both be right.

63 (04:03 MH) Mr Marriott was not suspended. I was entitled to express my views. I was entitled
64 to be consulted.

65 (04:10 JP) Did you threaten to overrule him?

66 (04:11 MH) I – I was not entitled to instruct Derek Lewis and I did not instruct him, and the
67 truth –

68 [(04:16 JP) Did you threaten to overrule him?]

69 (04:18 MH) The – the truth of the matter is that Mr Marriott was not suspended. I did not –

70 [(04:22 JP) Did you threaten to overrule him?]

71 (04:23 MH) I did not overrule Derek Lewis.

72 (04:25 JP) **Did you threaten to overrule him?** ⁽⁴⁾

73 (04:26 MH) I took advice on what I could or could not do –

74 [(04:29 JP) Did you threaten to overrule him, Mr Howard?]

75 (04:29 MH) and I acted scrupulously in accordance with that advice. I did not overrule Derek
76 Lewis.

77 [(04:34 JP) Did you threaten to overrule him?]

78 (04:34 MH) Mr Marriott was not suspended.

79 [(04:37 JP) Did you threaten to overrule him?]

80 (04:39 MH) I have accounted for my decision to dismiss Derek Lewis –

81 [(04:43 JP) Did you threaten to overrule him?]

82 (04:45 MH) in great detail before the House of Commons.

83 (04:47 JP) I note you're not answering the question whether you threatened [(04:50 MH) Well,
84 the –,] to overrule him.

85 (04:51 MH) the – the important aspect of this which it's very clear to bear in mind –

86 (04:56 JP) I'm sorry, I'm going to be frightfully rude [04:57 MH Yes, you c–], but – but I – I'm
87 sorry, it's a straight yes-or-no – it's a straight yes-or-no question I – I – I give you. [(05:01 MH)
88 I will – I will give you – I will give you an answer] Did you threaten to overrule him?

89 (05:05 MH) I discussed this matter with Derek Lewis. I gave him the benefit of my opinion. **I**
90 **gave him the benefit of my opinion** ⁽⁵⁾ in strong language, but I did not instruct him because I
91 was not, er, entitled to instruct him. I was entitled to express my opinion and that is what I did.

92 (05:23 JP) With respect, that is not answering the question of whether you threatened to overrule
93 him.

94 (05:28 MH) It's dealing with the relevant point which is what I was entitled to do and what I
95 was not entitled to do, and I have dealt with this in detail before the House of Commons and
96 before the select committee.

97 (05:40 JP) But with respect you haven't answered the question whether you threatened to
98 overrule him.

99 (05:44 MH) Well, you see, the question is what was I entitled to do and what was I not entitled
100 to do. I was not entitled to instruct him and I did not do that.

101 (05:53 JP) Right, er, we'll leave – **we'll leave** ⁽⁶⁾ that aspect there and move on to this question
102 of your bid for the leadership of the party. Wouldn't a reasonable person conclude that someone
103 who is unable even to unify a very small ministerial team in less than two weeks of losing office
104 is quite incapable of unifying a party?

105 (06:16 MH) I think that, er, there will be many of my colleagues who will understand that we
106 have to take some tough decisions if we are to recover the fortunes of our party. And if you are
107 to take tough decisions, that means that you won't always be able to obtain unanimous

108 agreement. I had to overrule Ann Widdecombe on the question of the dismissal of Derek Lewis
109 in the light of an independent report which said that, er, there were serious weaknesses in the
110 management of the prison service from top to bottom and I was prepared to take that decision.
111 It was not an easy decision to take because I thought it was my duty to take that decision in the
112 interest of the public.

113 (06:59 JP) If the rest of your ministerial team failed to come out and support you for the
114 leadership, would you then be prepared to concede that you perhaps don't have the capability
115 of unifying your party?

116 (07:09 MH) Well, the minister who has worked longest and closest with me for a period of five
117 years both at the department of the environment and the home office is, er, one of my strongest
118 supporters and a leading member of my campaign team, er, other, er, ministers who've worked
119 very closely with me are strong supporters and in my campaign team, er, my two PPSs that I've
120 had during the time that I've been home secretary are strong supporters of mine and in my
121 campaign team, so I think if you look at, er, most of those who've worked very closely with me
122 you will find that they are amongst my strongest supporters.

123 (07:43 JP) Do you seriously expect to be leader of your party?

124 (07:46 MH) I think that those in the party who will understand that there is a need for tough
125 decisions to be taken will see that I have taken those tough decisions. I have never shirked the
126 responsibility for taking those decisions, er, and I think that that is something which they will
127 take very seriously into account when they come to make their decisions.

128 (08:08 JP) Michael Howard, thank you.

129 (08:08 MH) **Thank you.** ⁽⁷⁾