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ANY QUESTIONS?

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PRESENTER: Jonathan Dimbleby

PANELLISTS: David Willetts
Minette Walters
Matthew Taylor
Mike O'Brien

FROM: Chequer Mead Theatre and Arts Centre, West Sussex

DIMBLEBY

Welcome to East Grinstead in Sussex. This is, as it were, Winnie the Pooh land, not far from Ashdown Forest. But the town is in the heart of the South East pressure cooker and claims nonetheless to retain its traditional feel, its relaxed character and its community spirit with this our venue the Chequer Mead Theatre and Arts Centre, which is indeed a mecca locally in the region for both amateur and professional performers.

On our panel: Minette Walters is famous as one of the new generation of crime writers. In 1994 *Ice House* won her the John Creasey Award for best first novel. Her most recent - *Fox Evil* - has just won the Crime Writers' Association's Gold Dagger Award. Her books focus, she says, on the seething discontent which is concealed beneath the most respectable of respectable facades. Which of course takes me to our three politicians.

The opposition first in the person of David Willetts, gifted - it used to be said - with too many brains to be successful as a Conservative politician. Nowadays undeterred he is both shadow secretary of state for work and pensions and head of policy coordination for Michael Howard. So the latest gag is that the Tories have in Charles Saatchi and Liam Fox two chairmen running the party and in David Willetts two brains running policy.

Matthew Taylor was, until a recent reshuffle, economic spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, now moved to the job of party chairman he'll be in charge of preparing his party's election manifesto.

Mike O'Brien has one job and two departments - as minister of state for trade he has a foot both in the DTI and the Foreign Office. He first came to prominence when inadvertently or otherwise he more or less put the boot in to Peter Mandelson over a disputed phone call during the Hinduja affair. Mr Mandelson resigned, for the second time, and later Mike O'Brien lost his job as Home Office minister, only to be restored

to office when the Prime Minister discovered he couldn't do without him - a plot somewhat worthy of Minette Walters. Our panel. [CLAPPING]

And our first question please.

HENDERSON

Neil Henderson. Is Clare Short a legitimate whistle blower or a law breaker?

DIMBLEBY

David Willetts.

WILLETTS

What Clare Short has done is wrong. We don't know whether she's broken the law, it's one of the many questions that the Prime Minister really needs to answer but she has abused her position as a minister. We don't know whether she genuinely did see any intelligence material that she's now talking about but it does look like a very serious breach of confidence - as she claims to have done so. I think that for that I don't see how she can remain as a privy councillor, I think we should ask - the Prime Minister needs to tell us why he's keeping her as a privy councillor. But I think the real tragedy is that we have this vendetta really going on, this enormous argument going on within the Labour Party about whether they should have gone into Iraq or not, in which clearly Clare Short represents one body of opinion and Tony Blair represents a very different body of opinion and it's our intelligence services and their reputation and their effectiveness which are the victims and I think it's appalling that she's dragged them into her argument - disagreement with Tony Blair about Iraq, I think that's just plain wrong.

DIMBLEBY

You say that ... [CLAPPING] you say that we don't know whether she saw the material, she says that saw transcripts - are you just disputing whether she - her voracity or whether the transcripts that she said that she saw were not in fact what she thought they were?

WILLETTS

Well I can't make a judgement on that, we've heard David Blunkett saying, for example, that he didn't see transcripts of this. I don't know exactly what she saw and I don't know whether - what it is that she claims. But all I can say is that just to have brought the secret service into it - the very allegation that she's making about secret service activities itself is a very serious and damaging one, I think it's a pity she's made it.

DIMBLEBY

Matthew Taylor.

TAYLOR

Well I think it's also extremely serious and damaging if it's true that the British government was intercepting conversations by the Secretary General of the United Nations. We were founder members of the United Nations, we signed up to the view that there should be no interference in their business - that includes not listening in on what they were doing. The issue that Kofi Annan was trying to deal with was to reach a peaceful settlement in Iraq and I think that she may or may not be a whistle blower and a law breaker but the question is was the British government engaged in activities which I think the great majority of people in this country would find totally unacceptable. Now that that is out as a question the Prime Minister has to answer it.

DIMBLEBY

We might come on to that in just a moment but in terms [CLAPPING] in terms of the question you don't - you clearly don't seem to regard quite as serious as David Willetts appears to do what she actually did.

TAYLOR

Well if you support the war and you think that - that listening into Kofi Annan was the right thing to do you will take that view. But I didn't support the war - the Liberal Democrats didn't support the war - but more important any whistle blower is by definition a law breaker - that is there in the nature of the Official Secrets Act. We have - well now the Official Secrets Act - well the Official Secrets Act prevents people from giving information, therefore if somebody gives information by definition they have broken the law. The question is whether the government was right to be doing this and clearly there are circumstances in which governments should be held to account. To say that there is anything that comes under national security should never be cross-examined or looked at is clearly wrong, there may well be circumstances in which that should happen, in this case we don't know until government tells us more about what actually happened.

DIMBLEBY

We might - as I said - we might come on to that but just on the one point - if you whistle blow you have only prima face - only on the surface - have you broken the law because you've only actually broken the law if you're then found in a court guilty as charged. You haven't automatically broken the law because you've whistle blown.

TAYLOR

Assuming the information is true then it would appear that she has broken the Official Secrets Act - that's assuming it's true, we don't know whether it was or not, which is why we can't reach a conclusion on it. But it is also the case that if these acts took place it is extremely hard to understand how the Prime Minister could claim that the government itself hadn't broken the law because the charters of the United Nations are extremely clear on this point. I think that this is an extremely exceptional allegation by a former cabinet minister about an issue which took this country to war and in those exceptional circumstances the Prime Minister I think needs to make it clear one way or the other what happened.

DIMBLEBY

[CLAPPING] Minister, is she a legitimate whistle blower or a law breaker is the question?

O'BRIEN

Well Clare Short is on what she calls her journey of conscience which seems to have taken some funny turns during the course of the period since she left the cabinet and it's involved her now in making quite reckless - and I use that advisedly given she used it repeatedly just before the war, before she voted with the government, about the Prime Minister - she is now making reckless allegations, damaging not only to the Labour Party, which she claims to be a part of and at the moment of course is but we don't know where her journey of conscience will take her, and she's indulging in what seem to be a whole series of personal attacks on the Prime Minister which are just damaging. Now in terms of whether she is a whistle blower or a law breaker, well

David Blunkett's already indicated his view on that and those issues might well be looked at. But we do have an intelligence services commissioner - Lord Justice Brown - who can look at anything the intelligence services does and its legality. So what I would say is that what I cannot do as a minister and no minister can - and Clare knew this when she made her reckless allegation - is confirm or deny any such allegation and just because we can't do it doesn't mean that it is true, we just can't do it because once we get down that route we then get - said well you denied the last one, why can't you deny this one and then you go down a whole series of things

DIMBLEBY

I understood that you won't do that but can a minister - can a minister not answer - can a minister not answer this question - if it were the case that what she alleged were true that this would be a matter for grave disquiet that a British government should authorise the spying on the Secretary General of the United Nations - as a matter of principle is that right or wrong?

O'BRIEN

Well as a matter of principle no minister can either confirm or deny, no matter how uncomfortable ...

DIMBLEBY

I haven't asked you ...

O'BRIEN

No matter how uncomfortable it gets no minister can comment on any issue which is an allegation about an operational issue for the intelligence services ...

DIMBLEBY

Can I put another ...can I just try one more thing on you ...

O'BRIEN

Well you can try another thing Jonathan but you're not going to get very far with it I'll tell you.

DIMBLEBY

If I said to you - is it right or wrong to behead an individual without trial you would automatically say it's wrong wouldn't you?

O'BRIEN

I could express - express an issue because I don't think the intelligence services would be involved in that.

DIMBLEBY

So why can't I, if that's wrong, why can you not answer, as a matter of principle, whether it's right or wrong to spy on the Secretary General of the United Nations?

O'BRIEN

Because a specific allegation has been made by Clare Short. She is making a clear allegation about an operational issue which she says the intelligence services was involved in. What you're seeking to do - quite legitimately as a journalist and I quite

legitimately as a minister have to tell you that I cannot comment, I cannot confirm or deny that and there are good reasons for that and the good reasons are we would quickly get dragged down into other issues so that at some later stage I might be asked, for example, was the intelligence services involved in looking at particular Pakistani scientists. Now we happen to know that at one stage they were ...

DIMBLEBY

I think the journalists ... it's not my role to ... in this context but I think journalists might respond by saying it's quite valid to make a distinction between asking about a matter of principle and asking whether or not a particular thing happened but that's a matter of - that's a matter of dispute ...

O'BRIEN

Well it's not because you're seeking to come into the sort of specific issue by way of the principle and that's what I'm refusing to do with you. And no matter how uncomfortable it gets Jonathan you know very well, as a journalist, because this has happened under every single government in the past that no minister will - no minister of any government will make a confirmation or a denial of an allegation.

TAYLOR

Since David Blunkett says he didn't see or get the transcripts are we allowed to ask the Prime Minister if he got the transcripts because that would of course finally answer the question?

O'BRIEN

Well in terms of what you ask the Prime Minister you can do that at Question Time Matthew.

TAYLOR

Well so David Blunkett - David Blunkett ...

DIMBLEBY

I'm going to bring in Minette Walters if I may.

WALTERS

Well I think I'm going to take the cynical view. And the cynical view is that I remember when Labour were first elected they positively encouraged whistle blowers in the NHS. When the whistle blowing is turned on themselves they don't like it so much. [CLAPPING] As to whether or not Clare Short is a law breaker I would say almost certainly. However, she will not be prosecuted because the government cannot afford to take her to trial and listen to what she has to say. [CLAPPING]

DIMBLEBY

We'll go to our next question please.

SEXTON

Lorraine Sexton. Does Britain have the right to spy on anyone it likes?

DIMBLEBY

Mike I'm sorry you're not going to be able to answer this one as well - does Britain have the right ...

O'BRIEN

I can tell you what the legal situation is. We have to comply with law, of course we do and that's what we do. I think everyone knows that we are currently facing a terrorist threat of substantial proportions. We all know what happened on September 11th and we all know the seriousness of that. We all know that we've had a number of issues in relation to Iran, Libya, indeed Iraq and Afghanistan - all of which are very serious matters. We have an intelligence service which has carried out a number of activities, including exposing what's been happening in a number of countries, including Libya for example, being very successful in dealing with some of the issues in relation to Iraq particularly, for example ensuring that we got into Basra with very little loss of life.

DIMBLEBY

So you're allowed to say ...

O'BRIEN

And so we know ...

DIMBLEBY

... that intelligence services are working in Libya but you can't say whether intelligence services should or shouldn't work in the UN?

O'BRIEN

No I can do that, I can do that because those issues are already in the public arena, in the sense that those statements have been made and those issues have been very clearly ...

DIMBLEBY

Sorry which statements have been made?

O'BRIEN

... made public about what we have been doing in relation, for example, to the war in Iraq in relation to Basra - the security services are quite public about that. Likewise in relation to Libya, I think everyone's read it in the newspapers that we've had people there who've been assisting the Libyans in dismantling some of the weapons of mass destruction, that's all public. What I can't do however ...

DIMBLEBY

I'm now really confused - and maybe others are as well - if it gets into the newspapers you can answer the question, if it doesn't get into the newspaper you can't.

O'BRIEN

No, if somebody makes an allegation ministers throughout the whole of the last 40 years have not got into a situation where they either confirm or deny them. And as I say it is uncomfortable and I can see why journalists are asking these questions and the public say oh well you've got to answer them and we've got Clare Short making all sorts of allegations. But I think when people realise that the minister is put in a position where if they deny one allegation then they're - it's put to them next time - when you denied the last allegation if you're not denying this time it must be right - and you then are led down a track where you do actually place in danger the operation of the intelligence service which is absolutely crucial to our security at a time when the country's under some threat.

DIMBLEBY

David Willetts.

WILLETTS

The intelligence services have to work within the framework of the law, we are a country that lives by law and nobody whatever they do, whatever their post - high or low - in the secret service or not can be exempt from the law. We do need however to recognise that there are large numbers of threats to our security and that there tends to be a cycle that countries go through and you saw it in America, that in times of peace we get more and more demanding and set higher and higher standards and more and more restrictions on what intelligence services can do and then there's suddenly some appalling attack, such as the Americans had on 9/11 and they say why didn't you have more intelligence, why didn't we know about this? And then they realise they've had so many restrictions on who their intelligence services could deal with and what sort of intelligence operations they could carry out, they weren't getting the intelligence they need and suddenly they've got - they've gone into the other extreme and they can do anything. And I do think that sadly in today's world there are a whole range of threats from terrorism and we do need protection from people who go out and get intelligence in a variety of ways so that they can head off those threats. And provided it is done within a framework of legal institutions including - including proper supervision and the framework for supervision for intelligence services is now better than it has ever been - through the 1990s successive governments have put in place, the House of Commons Select Committee which can access information about what they do, now have an official position for whistle blowers and though Matthew Taylor wasn't quite right what he said earlier we do now have a recognition that people who have anxieties about the morality or legality of what's going on should be able to take their concerns to someone who's not a professional member of the intelligence services. We've got those protections in place and now what we need is effective intelligence gathering so that we can carry on being a safe and secure country in a very dangerous world.

DIMBLEBY

So it is your view that only those who have under the law justified spying upon them are spied upon by the British intelligence services?

WILLETTS

The intelligence services have to work within the framework of the British law which determines what they can do and what they can't do ...

DIMBLEBY

And you have a hundred per cent faith that they operate within British and international law?

WILLETTS

Well all I can say is the case we've had this week - the woman at GCHQ - what I found surprising and shocking about her behaviour was that she'd not taken up the avenue that was available to her, if she had concerns that the British intelligence services were doing something illegal, which we understand was her argument, then she could have taken those concerns - there was provision made, I think, in the '94 act that we passed - she could have taken those concerns to someone who is not a professional working within the intelligence services. That safety valve had been put into the system precisely to help people like her.

DIMBLEBY

So were you shocked and concerned that the prosecution didn't go ahead against Miss Gun?

WILLETTS

Well that was it - so I thought she was wrong not to have done that. I thought in terms of what the government did - trying to prosecute her and then at the last moment withdrawing the prosecution - the whole thing - that was a shambles. Now why was that a shambles? That gets into deep waters. Now there's another story here - there's whole material for a Minette Walters novel here but what we seem to have had - what they seem to have done was they were going to be under pressure to reveal the legal advice that the Attorney General was giving to the government about whether the Iraq war was legal or not and we don't know but there's a lot of gossip around that the Attorney General at some stages had his doubts about whether it was legal. I don't know if that's true or not but it looks as if the Attorney General was sufficiently worried that this evidence would be required as part of the case that he decided it would be better for them to drop the case and it looks very political to me, the whole events of the last week - very political indeed. [CLAPPING]

DIMBLEBY

Mike O'Brien will want to respond to that but first of all Minette Walters.

WALTERS

I think my role tonight is kind of not to do the political thing and in a way I'd quite like to turn your question on its head. I mean you say does Britain have the right to spy on anyone it likes - if we turn it on its head we then saying - does everyone else in the world have the right to spy on us and how do we feel about that? I personally am absolutely shocked by what Clare Short revealed and I'm afraid I believed her. Whatever my views on why she did it, how she did it and all the rest of it, I actually do think she was telling the truth. And I personally am very shocked indeed that this country saw fit to listen in to conversation of the Secretary General of the United Nations, I mean this is number one man in the world's biggest union and I don't think we should be doing that. And by the same token I do not believe that anybody who feels like it outside this country should be entitled to come and bug our prime minister, our queen, our head of state whatever - I think that is wrong. [CLAPPING]

DIMBLEBY

Matthew Taylor.

TAYLOR

Well I mean first of all we just need to take it back to what Kofi Annan's job was in this situation. His job was to try to work with countries around the world and with the Iraqis and with the inspectors to try and avoid the circumstances that led to war. And I don't believe you can do that job if those you are talking to on opposing sides - different views - believe that you're being listened into in the course of those conversations and negotiations by other people with a vested interest. Inevitably he is deeply undermined in that work. And it is this country that was meant to be supporting him in that process and arguing and it is this country that was part of setting up the United Nations to achieve that. I think that the United Nations was deeply undermined by this country going to war when they were asking for a matter of months more to complete the inspection process and I think this revelation has further deeply undermined the role of the United Nations. And that's why I believe it's so exceptional that the Prime Minister has to clarify the situation - was this happening? If it was I think it was quite wrong and I think it should be stopped. And until we know that we won't have an answer. But certainly I believe it wasn't right and in the long run it threatens us all with a more unstable world, more threatened, because the United Nations will be less effectual. [CLAPPING]

DIMBLEBY

Minister, what did you think of the Americans asking the British to participate in a ...

O'BRIEN

Another good try Jonathan. But all I have to do, as I say, no matter whether it's uncomfortable or not is take the line that every minister takes for the last 50 years and that is to say I cannot confirm or deny or comment on these things.

WILLETTS

Geoffrey Boycott would be proud of you Mike.

O'BRIEN

Yeah I'm sure.

DIMBLEBY

Well I mean do you want to respond to the point about the trial that was dropped, which is I think ...

O'BRIEN

Yeah, let me just deal with that because the Attorney General has been very clear in his statement in the House on that. The decision was made by the Crown Prosecution Service, who consulted with the director of prosecutions - I understand the leading treasury council was Mark Ellison and the DPP is Ken MacDonald - and also the Attorney General and these people made this decision, they did it because they took the view that the interplay between various other evidential issues within the legal framework - that was the description used - I know it's a very legal description but ...

DIMBLEBY

The jury wouldn't send her down - is what that means in shorthand doesn't it.

O'BRIEN

No it doesn't. Can I just - no it doesn't - what they meant is in effect that they took the view that they would not be able to proceed with the case. Now it was not stopped at the late stage - contrary to what David said - I appreciate David may have read the newspapers and assumed this was a late stage - it was actually an early stage. We hadn't got to the trial, we were some way away from a trial. What had happened is an initial decision had been taken to take a prosecution based upon what this particular lady - Catherine Gun had said, admissions she had made - when they looked at particular issues relating to the way in which the evidence would interrelate with the legal framework they took a view that they would not proceed with it. It was at an early stage that they did that.

DIMBLEBY

Thank you. We will leave that there with a reminder of the Any Answers number, it's 08700 100 444 and the e-mail address is any.answers@bbc.co.uk, that's after the Saturday edition of course of Any Questions. We'll go swiftly to our next question.

DAVIS

Daniel Davis. Can you think of anything less British than being forced allegiance to the Crown?

DIMBLEBY

Minette Walters.

WALTERS

Well do you know I think that's a wonderful question. I watched on the television these scenes - I think there were 19 of them weren't there - these rather brave people I have to say put themselves up as being the first people ever in the history of British society to swear allegiance. And I was particularly taken by one old lady who either hadn't learned her words or had forgotten them or - and I hope this was the truth - didn't think much of them because she kept her mouth shut all the way through. And my feeling is that that's what she did - the latter - she didn't think much of the words and I think that means she's going to make a very good citizen. [CLAPPING]

DIMBLEBY

David Willetts.

WILLETTS

Well it is a very good question, it's a very good question because it gets us to think about what it is to be British and what Mr Davis's question reminds us of is that indeed historically one of the things about our country is that so many things are unstated, so many things that other countries have to make explicit we don't have to, they're just sort of shared understandings. But as one constitutionalist said - the trouble with shared understandings is they're not always understood. And the - and I think we've reached a stage where paradoxically because of our success, as the world changes, we're more global, we're more open, we're more diverse, one of the ways in which we have to change is to be a bit more open and explicit about what we believe than we were in the past. And it is indeed something we find awkward and sometimes we think it's not very British but I think for people coming to become citizens having some way of making that an event of significance for them is a good thing, I think this is a good initiative - I think it's valuable, I'm not sure it's the final word on the subject, we are into territories that other countries have been at for years. I think it's very moving when you see in America people who decide to become American citizens - I think that is a very powerful thing they do in America. And I think nowadays in Britain we do need to [indistinct word] about this, there are things which now we have to be more explicit about than in the past and I think it's a good try and we should develop it and build on it. [CLAPPING]

DIMBLEBY

Here's a question you can answer Mike O'Brien.

O'BRIEN

I'm glad about that Jonathan, I really am. First of all on this point about the Queen and should we swear allegiance to the Crown. Of course the oath which new citizens take is not new, it's just the ceremony that's new. So they've been having to take this oath for many decades, as I understand it. All we've done is brought it into - well I think it's a heart warming ceremony where people are actually welcomed into British

citizenship. And you know sometimes I think that we who are British citizens may not be quite as proud as some of those people who took the oath are to be British, we take it somewhat for granted. And I think these ceremonies give them a welcome to citizenship, give us the opportunity to acknowledge that we embrace them as part of our country and I think it's a very positive sign of the multicultural nature of British society. So I welcome the ceremonies and certainly in terms of the oath it is a traditional thing and we do have a queen is at the head of state, it is a traditional [indistinct word] those terms the oath should be - should mention her and it's right that that should be so. If people want to change that then obviously that's a matter of an entirely different debate.

DIMBLEBY

There is, Matthew Taylor, the pledge as well - as well as the oath - the pledge which says: I will give my loyalty to the United Kingdom and respect its rights and freedoms. I will uphold its democratic values, I will observe its law faithfully and fulfil my duties and obligations as a British citizen.

TAYLOR

I think these are all great things. I think much more important however is the fact that we actually have both a formal welcome and something which recognises that this is a really big deal for people who take British citizenship and they actually are very proud of that moment. I've got friends who've become British citizens and they've thrown parties, they've shown people the documents that show that they've got it. This is actually a big deal. And the one group of people who kind of not seen it as a big deal is the officialdom which has put them through this series of hoops that they have to get through to get it and then when you finally get it there's a sort of grudging well here's your documents issue, no one actually says well well done and fantastic and welcome and these are the things we hope you'll hope you'll achieve and gives them something to put up on the wall and remember it by. And I think that's all a fantastic thing and it's well, well overdue.

DIMBLEBY

Daniel Davis the panel seems to like the idea, you clearly have doubts about it?

DAVIS

Only some reservations, I think it's lovely to be able to welcome people to the country and I think that's a great thing to be able to do. My only concern is that when we actually saw it yesterday happening it seemed a little bit sort of contrived and it was difficult for me to recognise how much of Britain actually was in it - what did that represent for me because I'm from Wales and I looked at it and thought well - [LAUGHTER] saying God Save the Queen - what does it mean for me?

WALTERS

Perhaps you should be swearing ...

DIMBLEBY

I think you've got [LAUGHTER] Daniel it's 68 quid it costs. [CLAPPING] Daniel Davis thanks very much for that question. And our next please.

TAYLOR

Caroline Taylor. What is the panel's view on the suggestion put forward by 500 doctors this week that the NHS cannot cope with demand in its present form and that there should be a system of compulsory health insurance to meet people's healthcare needs and expectations?

DIMBLEBY

Matthew Taylor.

TAYLOR

Well what we know all around the world is if you go down those kind of systems they cost a lot more money. And that's true in America where they spend much more of their national income on a private health service. It's true throughout Europe as well where those kind of systems - when those kind of systems are used. And I think there's a question whether we actually want to spend a whole lot of money on a bureaucracy and a private sector and a profit system to get no extra healthcare. And then at the end of that, having spent a lot more money, what we also know from America is that private insurers actually don't cover large sections of the population, much worse than that they don't cover in particular long term healthcare because it doesn't pay to cover long term healthcare. So unless you're very wealthy in the United States you're unlikely to be covered in anything like the comprehensive way that we are in the UK, if you want a nice bed you'll get it, if you want a television at the end of the bed you'll get it, if you want good food you'll get it and if you've got short sharp treatment you'll get very good treatment if you can afford it. But if you've got long term problems you will not get the kind of support you get in this country. I think the issue is getting the NHS sorted out, not turning it over to the private sector.
[CLAPPING]

DIMBLEBY

Minette Walters.

WALTERS

Well I simply can't even begin to answer this question from an economic point of view, I really can't, I can only answer it from the heart. We had our three parents living with us for the last five years and they were all three very frail and I've been wanting to say this for a very long time - but the NHS was absolutely fantastic. And I get very [CLAPPING] I get very upset when all I ever hear is criticism of the NHS because that is not my experience. We could not have been given more support - my husband and I - for our three parents. And all I can say is - and as I say I say this from the heart because I do not know how to fund it - but the day we lose it, the day we go into private insurance and the day people start getting turned away in hospital casualty departments because they haven't got the right card, they haven't paid the right money, I think we will have lost one of the greatest institutions that this country has.
[CLAPPING]

DIMBLEBY

The health secretary - John Reid - said that this group was a Tory front organisation David Willetts.

WILLETTS

I don't believe that they were because what they were proposing was not what we, in the Conservative Party, think is the right way ahead. I mean I thought they were half right, I thought they were right that we have a very serious problem, they were right that the NHS can't cope at the moment and whilst Minette is correct when we do come across experiences that are fantastic within the NHS, sadly there are many other times when people do not get the sort of healthcare that we now should expect in an advanced Western country. So we do need reform but I don't believe in compulsory health insurance, I think there are big problems with compulsory health insurance and it's not the policy of my party. As to what we do need to do I think there are two things, one is to free up the professionals within the service. I mean I had a GP come to my surgery this afternoon bringing with him the latest sort of piles of printouts that he had been sent by the primary care trust that they have to wade through in his practice and it's clear that GPs who wanted to focus on patient care were instead having to focus on the latest set of bureaucratic instructions that had come from Whitehall. There is an incredible waste of effort there - we've got to tackle that. [CLAPPING] And we also - we also within the framework of NHS care, that should always be available for people, financed out of general taxation, as it is at the moment, we should also make it possible for people to combine some spending of their own alongside. And I think that is a taboo we've had in Britain which we do have to break - not compulsory health insurance but we should at least say that if - as I've had experience - again in my surgery if someone has been kept waiting by the NHS and they eventually give up and go private or go to any sort of independent outside organisation and start all over again with their hard won savings that they take out of their building society account to spend for the operation, really if people have been kept waiting are we sure that we should not make a contribution to the costs that they incur - a contribution say of 60% of what the NHS would have paid for their operation? So we're looking at ways in which we can break down some of the barriers between the traditional NHS and people who wish to use private medicine or go outside the NHS if they've been kept waiting but all within the framework - you're absolutely right Minette - of a National Health Service that is true to its founding principles of being available to everyone, financed out of general taxation if that is what they wish.

DIMBLEBY

So give to the 300,000 or so people who at the moment are prepared to pay for private care a top up from the government for doing so?

WILLETTS

Well no what I would - the way we see it working is that you would look at some of the - the classic sort of cold surgeries, as they're called - cataracts, hip replacements, varicose veins - where there are still sadly significant waits for people and if they wish - if they wish - and there's no obligation on anyone, the NHS remains available, but if they wish they can have a contribution of what the NHS would have spent on their care towards their care if they decide to pay for it outside the NHS. And that seems to me - that virtually any other advanced Western country is the sort of thing they do at the moment. These other systems have already got - broken down this taboo and I think we can do that, I think it will alleviate pressures on the NHS, I think it will tackle a widespread grievance, I think it will ease the burdens on the NHS, I

think it's a sensible part of reform but it is not the compulsory health insurance that these doctors were advocating.

DIMBLEBY

Mike O'Brien. [CLAPPING]

O'BRIEN

To some extent you have to admire these doctors who are open about their wish to privatise the health service, it seems David Willetts wants to do it by stealth. And what he is doing is diverting £2 billion out of the NHS into the private sector - money which could have been spent on making sure that the NHS works more effectively. Now we were talking earlier about being proud of things in Britain - the principles behind the NHS are healthcare free at the point of need are the ones that I think we can be very proud of and certainly the experience of people, through all the research that we've done on the NHS, the experience of people is very similar to that identified by Minette. It is that increasingly they see that what is happening in the health service - the extra doctors, 14,000 of them, the extra nurses, 55,000 of them in recent years that have come into the health service - are making improvements, it is important we do need to do a lot more. Okay there are 400,000 extra operations than there were in 1997 but at the same time there is still a waiting list that we need to get down. That does require more resources, it requires more resources going into the public sector not as David Willetts would do - put £2 billion of NHS money into the private sector.

DIMBLEBY

What about the thought that by giving this voucher you effectively free up some beds in the NHS, so those who can't afford to spend outside will go more rapidly up the waiting list and have their operation more quickly?

O'BRIEN

Well what you do is you put some people to the front of the queue and put others to the back. What you need to do is make sure that you give people a good opportunity to have the operation when they need it. That is why we are moving towards a much improved NHS where people can get an operation fairly much when they need it - it's still going to take some time to get there but the resources are going in - we're all paying an extra penny on our national insurance, 1 per cent of our national insurance, to put that extra resources in and it is having the effect - the extra doctors, the extra nurses - and indeed we've seen that there are one hundred - one thousand six hundred more acute and general beds in the last two years. The resources are going in, it is improving, it's still got to improve more.

DIMBLEBY

Your scheme, David Willetts, according to the government, puts £2 billion worth of public money that would be spent inside the NHS outside the NHS?

WILLETTS

Well these are - these are people who may - who would have been and remain entitled to be cared for by the NHS and what we're saying is that if you wish you can take for some treatments - and as I say we're thinking of the cold surgeries - probably 60% of what the NHS would have spent on you, you can, if you wish, take somewhere else. I think that is - I don't see that as being a particularly expensive ...

DIMBLEBY

Somewhere else with - I mean the figure - £2 billion - if that's the right kind of figure is quite a lot of money - of public money - to go to support those who would otherwise in most cases be taking private care in any case.

WILLETTS

Well I don't recognise that figure of 2 billion and of course it all depends on who wishes to take this up. It may - it entirely depends - it may involve some people taking up this option who'd otherwise have stayed within the NHS and had to wait longer and who then get a 60% contribution rather than 100% costs, it all depends. But I don't - what I don't see is anybody who loses from this - nothing has been taken away from anyone, it is simply an extra freedom.

TAYLOR

There's an obvious body that loses David which is there are already many people paying for private healthcare who can by definition in most cases afford to do so and your scheme would by definition subsidise every single one of those private operations, so therefore there must be less money for the NHS and for the rest of it and if it's not 2 billion and actually the Democrats believe it's more - what is it?

WILLETTS

Well it entirely depends on the behaviour of people who respond ...

TAYLOR

They're not going to turn it down are they.

WILLETTS

Well I'm pleased Matthew thinks it'll be such an attractive policy. It seems to me - this assumption that people who are all currently taking [indistinct word] option are somehow going - using private medicine - are all terribly rich is just not the case. I have pensioners coming to my surgery who spend the last £5,000 that they've got saved up in their building society account on getting a hip replacement operation because the NHS has kept them waiting for so long. These are not rich people.

DIMBLEBY

Minister, a very quick word before we move on.

O'BRIEN

David Willetts seems to be making here a completely uncosted promise. Our estimate of the cost of this promise is £2 billion, if he denies it tell us the price David - how much is your policy going to cost? You don't know do you - it's an uncosted promise.

DIMBLEBY

We shall I have no doubt return to this issue - I have no doubt we'll return to it but we can just squeeze in one more please.

HORNER

Valerie Horner. What if anything are the panel - members of the panel - giving up for lent?

DIMBLEBY

Not uncosted promises. David Willetts.

WILLETTS

I'll tell you - I'll tell you exactly what it is and of course the more public it is the better it is - the greater the chance I might actually stick to it. And it is cakes and biscuits and chocolate. And I tell you it's bloody difficult but I'm doing my best so far.
[CLAPPING]

DIMBLEBY

Matthew Taylor.

TAYLOR

I admit to total failure. I was giving up alcohol but I had a glass of wine before I came on the show.

DIMBLEBY

Mike O'Brien.

O'BRIEN

Well I very much hope that my older daughter isn't listening to this because I suggested that for lent she should give up chocolate and I would give up alcohol. Now not that I drink that much I can assure you but what I would say is that I had a glass of champagne at a party last night and I've broken my lent promise already.

DIMBLEBY

I hope she's listening, if not we'll give her a ring and she can come in Any Answers - 08700 100 444. And very briefly, I'm afraid, Minette.

WALTERS

Nothing I'm afraid, I'm sticking with all my vices. [CLAPPING]

DIMBLEBY

Next week on the panel, among others, Robin Cook and Ken Clarke. From here goodbye. [CLAPPING]