

## **In Doubt We Trust**

### **Programme 1**

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PTC Durham

I'm stood on Prebends Bridge looking at the sun shining on the towers of Durham Cathedral. It's an extraordinary site. As Sir Walter Scott put it, it's 'half church of God, half castle 'against the Scott'. That seems to capture something about what it is to be human. We long for things to be certain as steadfast as these stone walls we don't want to let doubt in. And yet if castles protect us, they also imprison us. (0'27)

FX footsteps.

As we walk up from the river now up the hill through what I think is called Windy Gap suddenly you come onto Palace Green and there it is – the Cathedral is right in front of you. It seems quite a long time ago now but I was actually ordained in Durham Cathedral. However life in a dog collar didn't go very well for me because after about 3 years I left the church. My doubts about Christianity were just too strong. I had a crisis of faith. But I'm not an atheist, I'm an agnostic. By which I mean I want to stay open somehow to the riches of this tradition. In the years since I left I've thought more and more about what it is to believe in things. Not just in religion but in science, in politics, even in other people for we live in a paradoxical time. On the one hand we have a kind of lust for certainty, but on the other we are also rather sceptical, even cynical. And over the next two weeks I want to ask – are these two things connected. Could it be that the fundamental problem is that we don't handle doubt very well. (1'03)

RB: The purpose of doubt is to question what you believe at the moment. (0'03)

SCRIPT: Rodney Barker is Emeritus Professor of Government at the London School of Economics.

RB: To look at new evidence to revise and revisit old theories and see if you might be mistaken. And medieval theologians knew this. The purpose of doubt is to arrive at faith so doubt is if you like the foundation but it is the foundation for certainty. (0'14)

SEGUE

RW: It's an art like riding a bicycle or swimming. You know, you trust sufficiently to put one foot in front of the other not quite knowing, you express your willingness to learn to grow, you don't wait until you have absolute cast iron clarity before you do anything when you move or think or speak. (0'17)

SCRIPT

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams – in a way, pointing out that we could not have left the arms of our parents unless we'd been prepared to take the risk of stepping out into an unknown world. Like growing up, doubt is not easy.

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It's 6.30 on a Monday evening and people are gathering at The School of Life in London. This particular class I teach has much to do with doubt, and people's anxieties are not far from the surface.

Vox pops school of life

1 Doubt and uncertainty are incredibly scary and I often survive it and look back and think thank goodness I've survived that situation or that time and I think its really tough and I think if people say its not tough they're fooling themselves or I want to know what they're doing.

2 I doubt lots of thing most of the time and I'm not sure it leaves me with any kind of core after that. I suppose I'm just suspicious of anyone who says I know what's right because I just can't possibly believe that they know what's right because there's always some reason to doubt.

3 Not being in control is the biggest challenge we have.

4 We're judged and measured on so many different things in our lives and that creates a kind of anxiety about the things that we can't control and yet we still feel responsible for the outcomes.

(0'48)

SCRIPT

This, then, is the paradox. We live in a time and place where there has probably never been more certainty. I know where my lunch is coming from. I can be reasonably sure my train will be on time. And yet, that does not do much to lessen the concerns. If anything, it deepens them. [Dr

Iain McGilchrist is a psychiatrist, neuroscientist and writer.

IMG We've come to believe that it is our right and our true expectation that life will be certain and under our control and that gives rise to immense amounts of unhappiness because of the mismatch because that's just not how the world is. And coming to accept it as fundamentally uncertain but not necessarily dangerous because it's not under our control but perhaps life giving because we can't control it. Perhaps opening up all sorts of possibilities that otherwise we would have controlled out of existence is really quite an important idea. (0'31)

SCRIPT

What this means is that if you stick to what you are certain of, you might well find a comfort blanket of security. But you'll also get stuck in a rut. And of course, nothing is as safe as houses so when the unexpected happens, you'll be doubly unstuck.]

Angie Hobbs is an Associate Professor in Philosophy and Senior Fellow in the Public Understanding of Philosophy at the University of Warwick. Being a philosopher means that artful doubting is her trade.

AH: I think we should be aware that there are healthy as well of unhealthy way of doubting and being sceptical and that doubt doesn't have to go along with paralysis of thought and action. It doesn't even have to go along with perhaps a rather sort of smug complacent switching off. That it can be something you can live with and that you can use as a basis which you can use for further intellectual exploration and that you can use it to try and work towards, if not full knowledge, at least beliefs which seem plausible and well reasoned and good enough to act on and I think we should be less frightened of it. I think some of us who are not scientists, I'm not accusing Scientists of this, some of us have made the mistake of thinking that modern scientific and technological advances give us an enormous degree of certainty and

an enormous degree of control over the world. And I think we can feel very frustrated and maybe rather annoyed when we find that some things are very difficult to decide and there maybe no definite decision which is going to be true for all time. (1.16)

#### SCRIPT

In other words, doubt has become a bad word. It's associated with fear and failure, and perhaps ideally is something to expel altogether. This explains something that is certain today. If you're a politician and want to win office, in fact if you want to succeed pretty much anywhere in the world, then any doubts you have in private, you should probably leave at home. Dr Rowan Williams.

RW: RW: It's very difficult for anybody in public in the political world to say 'well, this seems to me like quite a good idea but you know tell me about it let's explore, let's think about this together' is not a vote winner these days I think. And of course, that's reflected in some of the tone of the media who seem to assume that as soon as you admit that there might be more to be said or there might be qualifications to be made you're somehow whimpering out. (0'27)

#### SEGUE

ML: We have a very substantial problem with doubt or put another way round I think we have a very substantial problem with being addicted to certainty. (0'08)

SCRIPT: Mark Littlewood is the Director of the Institute for Economic Affairs.

ML: Always wanting to find perfect solutions to problems, always looking at social difficulties, terrible instances that have occurred and wondering what could we have done to stop them, what can we do to stop them again. And in our political and media discourse, doubt is an almost unacceptable thing to express. You will very rarely if ever hear a politician when asked 'what are you going to do about problem X?' say 'I don't know actually, I'm not sure we can solve it.' Everybody has to have a solution and then express a fairly robust rather aggressive confidence that that solution will deliver. So doubt actually gets crowded out from our public debate and is seen as a sign of weakness to conceive that you had doubt.

MV: Now you were head of media for the Liberal Democrats for a number of years, did you trade in certainties then?

ML: You have to trade in certainties. Let me give you an example of that. You can't say without causing a monumental amount of negative publicity that you think that by and large Liberal Democrat MP's are about 60 or 70% confident in the leadership of the party. You would be crucified for saying that, you would generate a story that was oh the cracks are beginning to appear that the leader, whether it's Charles Kennedy, Ming Campbell or Nick Clegg no longer commands confidence. That's an example of where you are at a 100% or nothing and it actually means you are frankly presenting to the world a story which isn't wholly true.

[ACT: Charles Kennedy – News clip

ML: The truth was for example around the time leading up to Charles Kennedy's resignation that there were a lot of people who had a lot of doubts about his leadership and those same people were saying that they're perfectly confident in Charles Kennedy and that wasn't the case. It often feels like a kind of game of bluff or a game of poker because a serious and intelligent discussion about the issues requires doubt, requires scepticism and requires people to be honest and admit that they aren't entirely sure of exactly what should be done in each and every area. (2'17)

SCRIPT: It's often said that British politicians are wise not to do God. But it seems they must not do doubt either. Crucifixion is the metaphorical punishment that awaits those who question even what is obviously questionable. This seems a sad state of affairs, and a rather childish one. It seems there's something in our culture that inhibits open discussion. Professor Rodney Barker.

RB: I think it's more that there's something in our culture which is sceptical about people who on the one hand aspire to govern us but on the other hand appear not to know what they're doing. That's why you'll hear people say about Margaret Thatcher 'I didn't like what she stood for but I knew where it was.' Whereas Gordon Brown was criticised for quite possibly thinking things through with a degree of economic sophistication and a grasp of the facts and the mastery of how both national and international economies work which was way, way ahead of any of his contemporaries but when it came to being the public face of government – hovering. What's he up to? Where's the dynamism? Doubt has a place but if a political leader never gets beyond doubt then he or she is not a leader. (0'47)

SCRIPT

That makes sense. If your decisions affect the lives of many people then those people will want to know you have the courage of your convictions.] But is there something else going wrong here. Philippa Garety is Professor of Clinical Psychology at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London. She tries to understand what goes wrong when individuals become mentally ill with delusions – perhaps, when they are so certain they are being persecuted that they develop a profoundly disabling persecution complex. One of the ways out of such terrifying conditions is, gently, patiently, to show sufferers there are other ways of looking at the world, and that they can safely doubt their own. She believes there are parallels that can be drawn with the way political and other institutions work in England.

PG: When people institutions whether it be politics or the churches adopt positions of extreme certainty. The consequences will be that they will find it difficult to engage in effective dialogue with others and to learn from others because they will be like a delusional person finding it difficult to consider the alternatives and weigh the evidence and to step back from the position that they are strongly advocating. It is classically the case that the debating chamber of the House of Commons would be the least effective way of dealing with difference and exploring different perspectives or indeed the synodical government of the Church of England that these are not effective ways of considering how to have dialogue across strongly held positions.

MV: How would things be arranged to make it better?

PG: It would involve conversations in which we would deliberately help people to seek to understand the grounds for people's beliefs and encourage and reward those people who can acknowledge that they may be mistaken, that there may be alternatives, it may be worth doubting a position and taking a second and third and fourth look. (1'22)

SCRIPT Professor Garety also knows the value of humour in helping delusional people. It eases their anxiety, and so creates a space where they can risk thinking differently. This reminded me of how we like politicians who can tell a joke, who can even risk sending themselves up. Mark Littlewood again.

ML: I think that we need the rise of the maverick. The past and present Major of London are seen as outspoken mavericks within their parties. Colourful characters such as Howard Flight or Lord Young or Vince Cable. Having a diverse range of views expressed I think is important but party leaderships don't like them. What party leaderships instinctively want to see is a whole list of automaton MPs who are loyally doing exactly what's picked up on their pager. So leaders of political parties and movements need to be more tolerant of diverse opinion and I think that would help the culture of cross examination. In order to have a proper discourse exploring doubts and certainties you need people to speak freely. (0'49)

#### SCRIPT

It's interesting that Mark Littlewood should mention the need to speak freely because freedom can be frightening too. With freedoms come choices, and then we're back to doubt, because often we can't be sure about the choices we have to make. There're few guarantees they'll be the right ones. In fact, too much choice can be debilitating, as you'll know if you've ever panicked in the long aisles of a large supermarket. All you wanted was a packet of breakfast cereal. The psychiatrist, Dr Iain McGilchrist.

IMG: I think we are very keen for certainty and I think that we think we've got it and I feel very strongly that certainty is an illusion and there is no such thing as certainty. What we mean by certain knowledge is something that works in a certain context and gives us a certain kind of knowledge but it doesn't give the whole picture, that's not possible and that picture does seem to I think it was emanated from a sort of scientific materialist world view and has gone in to the culture and people expect certainty. I think we are very unhappy with things that we're not certain about. (0'37)

SCRIPT The scientific materialism Dr McGilchrist refers to is that view of the world which sees it as deterministic and mechanistic. A delusion arises that because some things can be described by strict laws and are seen to behave in predictable ways, that therefore everything in the world can be regarded similarly. It's an idea of certainty that was explored by the French philosopher René Descartes, and his thought has had a big impact on the modern world. He wanted to establish firm foundations for what we can know and he had a rather brilliant idea as to how to do that. He would turn doubt on itself. Doubt everything you can, he says, and see what's left standing. John Cottingham is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Reading University and a world expert on Descartes. He explained to me how Descartes arrived at probably his most famous idea.

JC

'I am here quite alone' he says and he thinks of himself sitting by the fireside in a winter dressing gown meditating, what can he be sure of? Can he be sure of say the table, the chairs in front of him? No, because the senses he says are unreliable. 'The senses have sometimes deceived us and we shouldn't trust things which have deceived us even once.' He then doubts whether there's a world at all. 'The whole world might be a dream, might be an illusion beamed into my mind by some malicious demon.' So even our faith in the world around us has gone. And nothing seems now certain until he finds one single point of certainty. And his one point of certainty is his own existence. 'Even if I'm deceived I must exist, even if I doubt at least I must exist.' So this is the famous 'I think, therefore I am.'

MV So why is he so important in the modern world?

JC: I think he's important because these questions of knowledge and certainty are still with us. He's also important because he starts a new way of thinking, a way of thinking that begins with me, my own thoughts or you and your own, a kind of subjective start. We're if you like bereft of the normal guidelines, the normal existing structure of reliable knowledge that have been handed down to us. Although Descartes firmly believes in God in a way the scenario he presents us with is one where we start on our own.

MV: I wonder whether Descartes set the bar for certainty perhaps too high?

JC: Well I think he was right in saying there's a lot of what had previously passed for reliable knowledge was highly dubious. Did he set it too high? Well he was very impressed with the power of mathematics. Mathematics provides the kind of precision, clarity and distinctness he called it which you don't get with a lot of ordinary so called common sense observations and what he envisaged was science based on clear and precise mathematical measurements. Now that has stayed with us, that if you like his great enduring contribution. We all now accept that science has to proceed by formulating equations in a mathematical way and that the variables in those equations have to be things you can measure – weight, mass if you like nowadays, size, shape, motion – these are the basic physical properties of the universe which underpin all our modern scientific knowledge and that really begins in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century with Descartes. (3'12)

#### SCRIPT

The beauty of mathematical clarity is hard to forget once glimpsed. Descartes set up an ideal for knowledge that's spread. And in many parts of life it is very sensible to rely on science. But science is not the measure of all things.

Take an issue like friendship, which most people would agree is vital for a happy life. Does it make any sense to measure the value of, say, a soulmate? Or even something more basic, like how many friends you have? It's often far from clear what people mean by the word. And yet, everyone knows about friendship. It's just that this knowledge is gained mostly in a practical way, by being a friend and reflecting on the experience.

Dr Rowan Williams.

RW: Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century or so there's been a kind of mythology that there's really only one way of knowing and it's sort of hard knowledge, experimental knowledge in a narrow way rather than experiential, things that we can nail down that we can prove and so forth and the idea that we might know in other ways which are less easier to nail down and are more concerned with relationship and with growth, you know that's difficult in a world dominated by the one model. (0'30)

#### Script

But if it's scientific materialism that promotes this model, is it right to blame science for our problems with doubt? I asked Michael Brooks, a science writer whose best known book is entitled, 13 Things That Don't Make Sense.

MB: It's partly the fault of scientists and that they have set themselves up and this really happened in the post war period, this you know we can deliver results, science is good for you, science can tell you this and tell you that and so people have got used to actually scientists delivering certainty and they almost don't hear the caveats and they don't hear the uncertainties so there's the pressure on the scientists to keep that up really and not to sort of suddenly start packing away from their results. And there have been pronouncements throughout history where people have said 'right,

science has got it all, we've nailed it now.' There was a famous one by Albert Nicholson who said 'all of the important things are now understood.' And that was about 10 years before Einstein came along and revolutionised our view of the universe and then 5 years later you know quantum theory was born and revolutionised our view of everything else. So it's always been the trap that scientists have fallen into in some respects, but this is a dilemma for science, this is a double edged sword because if you don't seek certainty then what are you seeking? I mean science is about trying to work out what really is the case and the doubt has to come because you've never got the right answer or we certainly have never reached the right answer yet. But at the same time you know this thirst for certainty and thirst for understanding is what has brought us the modern world effectively.

MV: But d'you think science can also help us to live with what we don't know?

MB: There are limits to what we can know and that's clear and science has been living with doubt and uncertainty and open mindedness for all of its life and actually science is doing rather well and it's a good thing to question yourself constantly. This is the way of science if you like and actually it's not a bad way for everyone to be. (1'40)

#### SCRIPT

In fact, neuroscience suggests that a certain kind of uncertainty may be built into the way our brains work. Iain McGilchrist's research has led him to conclude that the two hemispheres of the brain have very different takes on the world. They are both necessary for us to function as human beings. But they are also mutually incompatible.

The left hemisphere is good at focus and specifics: it builds a worldview that is internally consistent, but detached. Dr McGilchrist also calls it the 'Berlusconi of the brain', because it tries to control the way we talk with one another. The right hemisphere, though, is different. It has a broad, open attention. It is good at making connections and handling the unexpected, though it is also less sure of itself.

IMG: The left hemisphere can only see what it knows so it doesn't know that there's an importance somewhere else. The right hemisphere knows because it's uncertain that there are important things that the left hemisphere can contribute. So the right hemisphere is inclusive and understands the importance of its partner, the left hemisphere is exclusive and understands only the importance of what it knows.

MV: If we are pre-occupied with certainty does that suggest we are a left brained culture?

IMG: I think our culture has moved further and further towards the world picture that is delivered to us by our left hemisphere, yes. (0'31)

#### SCRIPT

Dr McGilchrist is careful when making such comparisons. After all, it's not brains that feel uncertain, but human beings. It's not neurons that are wary of doubt, but particular times and places. But there is a careful balancing act that goes on seamlessly between the two hemispheres which is illuminating.

IMG: In order to do its job the left hemisphere produces something like a map of reality it substitutes tokens for things. Now that is very helpful because limited knowledge is sometimes better than too much knowledge. If you are a General fighting a campaign you want a map in your campaign room which has a few flags showing certain positions – the lie of the land in general, you don't want to know

about all the plants that grow there and so forth. And so it creates a very simple version of the world which is tokens for things in which words becomes more important than the things they refer to, the abstract concept is more important than the concrete individual unique variable reality and I think we've entered a world in which the virtual has become more important than the real. Ticking boxes has become more important than the thing that it actually refers to in the workplace – that is one aspect that I see. Another would be a general paranoia and standoff between individuals because the left hemispheres essentially competitive, it's about how to do this and gain an advantage. The right hemisphere seeing the whole, sees that while that may be important in certain context the world can't be like that because it's also able to see the connectiveness of things in fact it's where in the brain empathy is best served. So we need to have both of those things but in our modern world it seems that we have a kind of institutional paranoia that there is those who try to run our society think that by ever tighter control ever greater observation they will achieve some sort of a goal. (1'30)

#### SCRIPT

Mark Littlewood described the high pressure environment of contemporary politics, and party managers who seek such control. But politics is not alone in this paranoia. Think of what's happened in the markets, and the financial crash of 2008. Everyone knows that houses prices can fall as well as rise; that stocks that go up, also come down. And yet, when the going looks good – when the thrill of the bet is on – they are facts of life that are easy to forget. We're once again seduced into thinking there are certainties to be had. Eric Lonergan is a macro hedge-fund manager at M&G Investments and the author of 'Money'. He watched the crisis happen.

EL: When you have a bubble, which means that people become complacent about the risks particularly in lending, in housing and in housing related securities, that was because there was collective mania and belief formation so banks all agreed with each other that the economies would stay stable and house prices would rise. Populations believed that high prices would continue to rise. So in the sense that collectively we all ignored and lacked humility in the fact that we had no idea what was going to happen in the future, the degree of economic stability we were used to. I don't think there was a single group had a full understanding of what was happening. (0'41)

#### SCRIPT

There is a psychological explanation for this collective blindness. It has everything to do with the uneasy relationship we have with uncertainty.

EL: Now when you observe financial markets I think you see two human reactions to this question of uncertainty which is - when decisions relevant to the future are relatively difficult to make people take comfort in the behaviour of others. So I think collective belief formation in the face of uncertainty was certainly a very considerable factor. The other is a false sense of security through gathering information data and doing analysis, certainly was a big factor in the financial crisis with risk management but even if you look at the behaviour of gamblers betting on horses people's degree of confidence, and this has been studied by a cognitive psychologist, will increase in making these decisions if they have more information. Even if the information does not actually improve the probability of success. So as human beings we do seem to



be comforted by the fact that somebody of authority says it is ok to do it or we have some sort of system that looks complicated and provides us with information and facts and analysis even if in fact it isn't enhancing our decision making.

MV: So it sounds like you're saying the science trying to deal with doubt is inherently limited itself?

EL: Absolutely. If a bank is making loans all over the world, if there's an economic recession what will happen to those loans – that in a sense was the core of the problem – answer that question is extremely difficult. Now you can get a group of PhDs to construct very complex models which makes you comfortable about doing it. The truth is those models don't actually answer those questions. So there is a false comfort in pseudo science and complexity that doesn't get to the core uncertainty. And those two phenomena go right to the heart of the financial crisis but of course they are much deeper psychological characteristics that are evident more broadly in human behaviour. (1'55)

#### SCRIPT

There has been much analysis of what caused the financial crisis and at M&G Investments what Eric Lonergan and his colleagues have tried to do is base their decisions around the fact that you can't forecast the future. The trick is to keep things simple and plan by what you can know with reasonable certainty. However, there is one particularly tough nut to crack.

EL: The difficult thing to tackle is here is now do we get people to think for themselves when encountering uncertainty and I do think there is a lot to be learnt from philosophy which personally I have found philosophy to be very useful because it forces you to ask very difficult questions and you do realise that most bodies of knowledge are premised on assumptions which are quite difficult to justify. (0'25)

#### SCRIPT

I asked Angie Hobbs whether philosophy could help us understand how to do doubt better and achieve a better balance between doubt and certainty?

AH: I would certainly hope that philosophy well conducted do not lead to a closing down and a closing off of one's view point. I'm always going to advocate further intellectual exploration and trying to search for either the truth of a particular subject area or if that's not a possibility then the best reasoned belief possible. But I think that needs to be done in an intelligent and measured way and not driven by some almost irrational lust for certainty. Is this really a debate about control and a delusion that we can control the world and financial markets and the natural world and control those nearest and dearest to us. Is that what's embedded in this very strong desire for certainty? I don't know but it does trouble me. (1'00)

#### SCRIPT

So philosophy is part of the answer. It does appear to be the case that the vision of René Descartes, and the allure of mathematical certainty, is partly what's given rise to our distrust of doubt.

But Professor Hobbs raises another, perhaps deeper issue. It's one that Professor Geraty talked about in relation to delusional fears. And has also been part of our discussion of financial markets and politics. It's a fundamental issue of what it is to be human.

We are creatures who seek a secure existence, so we build stone walls to protect us, like those of Durham cathedral. But we also don't like to be imprisoned, and a completely secure existence – were one possible – would actually feel too small for us.

We love to explore, to take risks, to reach for the unknown. When it comes to living, therefore, doubt is more of an art than a science. In next week's programme, I'll be looking again at science and philosophy, and religion, and asking how doubt might actually contribute to a flourishing life.