

EXTRACT FROM HANSARD

11 Mar 2002, 10.11 p.m.: Column 653

BBC

Lord Pearson of Rannoch asked Her Majesty's Government:

Whether the chairman and governors of the BBC are fulfilling their duty to produce political programmes which are impartial, wide-ranging and fair.

The noble Lord said: My Lords, I am most grateful to all noble Lords who put their names down to speak tonight, especially at this late hour. I suppose that I am a little disappointed that no past or present governor of the BBC is joining us, of whom there are a few in your Lordships' House. I cannot help wondering whether their absence says anything about the Question before us.

I suppose that bias, like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder. If broadcasting bias exists, it is peculiarly difficult to prove. That is because the programmes in question flash across our television screens or we listen to them on the radio perhaps with half an ear, and then they are gone. To prove broadcasters' bias or narrowness of coverage, their output has to be recorded, transposed into writing and analysed by an objective mind. Even then, there are difficulties because the written word does not record the tone of voice in which a question was put or a comment made, and that may be significant in relation to the way in which an interviewee is treated. So, laborious cross-referencing between the broadcast programme and its text is sometimes necessary. Also, in order to establish consistent editorial bias, it is not enough to record and transpose the odd programme here and there. One has to analyse a number of programmes which can reasonably be said to amount to a series. The whole process is laborious but it has to be done if the analyses are to carry credibility and thus form the basis of useful dialogue with those responsible for the programmes.

For many years, the Euro-realist movement in this country has been convinced that the BBC is biased in favour of the United Kingdom becoming part of European economic and monetary union and even more so in favour of our continued membership of the European Union. That partiality is alleged to go back to the 1975 referendum at least, and indeed the BBC has been good enough to admit that it was disgracefully biased in favour of the "yes" campaign then. But what about now?

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To answer that question, some three years ago, the noble Lords, Lord Harris of High Cross and Lord Stoddart of Swindon, and I—through the medium of our research unit, Global Britain—decided to commission serious analysis of the BBC's coverage of our relationship with the European Union.

I am aware that there are other areas in which the BBC's coverage is alleged to be unbalanced. There are, for instance, many who feel that the BBC has been less than even-handed in its treatment of the Irish question, that it is biased in favour of the Palestinians in the tragic conflict that is unfolding before us in the Middle East, and that generally it panders to anti-Americanism, perhaps in part as a result of its blind enthusiasm for the European dream. I simply do not know enough about those other very important areas to comment; nor am I aware of any relevant research of sufficient depth to put before noble Lords tonight. However, I understand that the research commissioned by my noble friends and I may well be unique in the history of the BBC. That is why I feel it is worth giving your Lordships some of its headline findings.

Before I do so, I should say that we were lucky to find analysts of impeccable background who have worked in broadcasting for most of their lives—insiders who brought an open mind to the subject. The firm we therefore commissioned was Minotaur Media Tracking, which is directed by Mr David Keighley and Mrs Kathy Gingel.

Mr Keighley's career went from reporter to producer at the BBC, after which he became publicity officer for BBC TV news and current affairs. He was then director of corporate affairs at TV-am, where his duties included compliance on editorial matters under the former IBA. He founded, and still is a non-executive director of, Newsworld, the leading international forum for news broadcasters. Mrs Gingel was a producer for London Weekend Television and rose to be features editor of TV-am. Therefore, no one can say that Minotaur's conclusions have been reached by a bunch of disgruntled Euro-sceptics who do not know how broadcasting works.

We have so far commissioned six surveys of the BBC's political coverage of the "European" issue. The main reports run to some 400 pages, supported by around 600 pages of background analysis, and some 780 transcripts which run to a further 1,800-odd pages.

Minotaur's first report covered the elections to the European Parliament, from 9th May to 6th June 1999. The headline findings were disturbing and were as follows. Less than 2 per cent of TV news coverage was devoted to the elections. There was no discussion about the wider issue of the UK's relationship with the European Union, and thus about the reasons for Euro-scepticism in Britain. The BBC concentrated massively on Conservative Party splits about the single currency, which were not otherwise evident at the time. It gave the meaningless Pro-Euro Conservative Party, which went on to win 1.2 per cent of the votes and no seats, similar prominence to the Conservative Party itself. Minority parties were virtually ignored, with the UK Independence Party being allowed only one

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negative interview, although it went on to win 7 per cent of the votes and 3 seats. The best statistic of all is that not a single Labour Euro-sceptic—not even the noble Lord, Lord Shore of Stepney, and not even the noble Lord, Lord Stoddart of Swindon—went on air for a single minute in 400 hours of coverage monitored.

Since then, we have commissioned five further reports into the BBC's political coverage, two of which concentrated on the "Today" programme, given its political influence. In one of these, for the period from 21st May to 21st July 2000, the report found that "Today" put on air two-and-a-half times more people in favour of the single currency than those against it. I leave your Lordships to decide upon the BBC's defence against this finding from the Assistant Director of BBC News:

"Clearly if the Government is having difficulty in deciding its European strategy and tactics, there is bound to be regular questioning of Labour MPs and supporters about those difficulties".

Indeed, but without putting a single Labour Euro-sceptic on air?

Another survey of "Today" from 9th January to 3rd February 2000 covered a series of three programmes lasting 30 minutes, which were billed as a discussion of the case for the UK to leave the European Union. But, in the event, only one person was allowed to put that case for some 35 seconds, perhaps because he was live and the BBC could not cut him out.

In fact, all those reports tell the same story, but I do not have time to give more detail tonight. We are putting all the reports on our research unit's website—globalbritain.org—in case any of your Lordships is a glutton for further punishment of this kind. We are also putting on the web most of our correspondence with the last and present chairman of the BBC, with some of the BBC senior staff, including the Director-General, and with the last and present Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

All this leads me to lay two complaints about the BBC before your Lordships tonight. The first, as your Lordships may have guessed, concerns the fact that its coverage entirely excludes any debate as to whether or not we should be in the EU. I know that many of your Lordships do not want to venture into that debate either, but millions of British people do, and the BBC has a clear duty to help them have it. It has a duty to do so because its charter and guidelines demand that:

"No significant strand of British public thought should go unreflected or under-represented on the BBC".

The BBC's defence, when accused of this omission, is understandable but not very good. It says that none of the main political parties wants to talk about leaving the European Union. But surely that makes its duty even more clear and urgent. And there can be no doubt that we are looking at a significant strand of public thought. I know that opinion polls are unreliable, but in this area they remain remarkably firm.

In answer to the consistent question from MORI, "If there were a referendum on whether the UK should stay in or leave the European Union, which way would

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you vote?", the vote to leave rose to 52 per cent during the last general election campaign and indeed it has not fallen below 40 per cent of those expressing an opinion since 1987.

Another consistent answer, supported by some 80 per cent of respondents, is that the British people do not think that they have been given enough truthful information about our relationship with the European Union to be sure what their opinion is, and they would like more. Surely the BBC should meet this need.

My second major complaint against the BBC concerns its internal procedures. It appears that all our reports have been given by the chairman to the BBC's management, and not to the governors, for consideration. I have to say I simply cannot understand this. How can it be right for the management to sit in judgment upon programmes which it has produced? Surely, it is for the governors to judge whether the BBC's management's output is impartial, wide-ranging and fair, and not for the management themselves.

I suppose I have only two areas of questions for the Minister. First, are the governors equipped to deal with the kind of deep and complex—and lengthy—reports that we have been giving to the chairman? If not, will the Government, encourage them to so equip themselves? There may be a chink of light in the new committee of 10 people which the chairman has recently proposed to assist the governors, but who will appoint those 10 people, who will pay them, to whom will they owe allegiance—to the BBC's management or to its licence fee payers? Failing a satisfactory new system here, is not the obvious answer to put the BBC wholly under Ofcom, which I know is not the Government's present intention?

Secondly and finally, if the Government are genuine when they say that they want to encourage public debate about the next and possibly last EU inter-governmental conference in 2004, will they start that debate? Will they ensure that the BBC covers that debate? Or are the Government not genuine about wanting to encourage that debate? Is the real situation that the BBC will not hold the national debate which is so clearly needed, at least in part because the Government do not in fact want it and the BBC does not want to offend the Government lest it ends up under Ofcom? Could the Minister tell us the truth of the matter?

10.22 p.m.