

*Lord Stoddart of Swindon
(Labour)*

*Lord Harris of High Cross
(Independent)*

*Lord Pearson of Rannoch
(Conservative)*

Gavyn Davies, Esq.,
Chairman, BBC,
Portland Place,
London, W1.



24th October, 2001

Dear Mr. Davies —

BBC Coverage of EU Matters

The Prime Minister has indicated that a referendum on entry into European Economic and Monetary Union may take place in this Parliament.

The BBC's role in leading and informing the debate on 'Europe' in the run up to this referendum will be crucial. But there is a serious question mark over the BBC's style and method of reporting issues connected not only with the "Single Currency" but also about Britain's relationship with the European Union in general. Independent professional research, commissioned by us from Minotaur Media Tracking and carried out over the past two years, shows that the Corporation's coverage has been skewed and has limited the agenda of the debate on the EU. This research, some of the most systematic ever mounted into the Corporation's output, consists of five studies over the last two years:

- 1. Reporting of the elections to the European Parliament on UK terrestrial television services and BBC Radio 4: May 9, 1999 – June 6, 1999**
- 2. The BBC and 'Europe': Today Survey May 22 – July 21, 2000**
- 3. The BBC and 'Europe': Today Survey January 29 – February 3, 2001**
- 4. BBC "Europe and Us" week Survey February 19 – 23, 2001**
- 5. The BBC and 'Europe': coverage of the flagship BBC News Programmes of the General Election 2001**

The first four of these were brought to the attention of your predecessor and the BBC's senior news personnel.

Their response, unfortunately, did the BBC little credit. It heightened our concern that the clearly documented criticisms set out in the reports have only in the most superficial of ways been taken on board by BBC news and current affairs editors and presenters. Given the scale and the nature of the research we would have expected them to have featured on the BBC Governors' as well as the

management's agenda. We do not believe this to be the case.

The latest of the five reports, into coverage of the recent General Election, confirms that the failings identified in the study of the European Elections still persist.

A sample of the major problem areas raised by each of the Survey Reports follows:

Survey 1 – Reporting of the elections to the European Parliament on UK terrestrial television services and BBC Radio 4 (600 hours of coverage)

- The BBC, notwithstanding the contemporaneous Kosovo conflict, severely limited coverage of the elections in terms of time and editorial prominence, thereby failing to give the electorate insight into or understanding of the issues involved.
- The BBC virtually ignored the existence of Euro-scepticism in the main parties apart from the Conservatives. No Labour Euro-sceptic went on air at all.
- The BBC gave the 'pro-Euro Conservative Party' a wildly disproportionate prominence, dramatising and over-emphasising Tory splits, (effectively discrediting/ undermining the Conservative Party and William Hague at the time).

Survey 2 – The BBC and Europe: Today Survey May 22 – July 21, 2000

- The BBC was simplistic in attributing manufacturing problems in Britain almost solely to the "high value of the pound", a politically-loaded and inaccurate phrase used by Europhiles to support their case for the Euro. (The pound was (and is) actually weak, standing at a 6-year low against the US Dollar, in which 60% of our foreign trade is denominated. The Euro was even weaker against all currencies, including the pound. So the problem of those who export to the Eurozone is a "weak euro", not a 'strong pound').
- The programme gave far more airtime to Europhile interviewees and spokesmen than they gave to Euro-sceptics, especially during a debate over the future of Nissan in the UK. While balance is not achieved solely by bean counting, the range of Europhile voices and points of view was far greater than that allocated to Euro-sceptics. The coverage was consequently skewed against the range of Euro-sceptic opinion and argument.

Survey 3 - The BBC and Europe: Today Survey January 29 – February 3, 2001

- The series was billed as covering the case for UK withdrawal from the EU, but only one person was allowed 35 seconds (live) to put that case, in some 30 minutes of coverage.

- The programmes undermined the importance of a Today poll finding that 30% of Britons favoured withdrawal by limiting comment on it to those politicians who wanted to minimise its importance. BBC correspondents Gordon Carrera and Sarah Nelson concluded that the poll's results should be viewed with caution and that very few politicians shared similar views, but they did not explore the 'come out' case at all.
- The language used by the presenters to describe withdrawal was emotive and biased, indicating that those who espouse withdrawal will have real difficulty obtaining an effective platform on any of the nation's main arenas of political debate. The Today programme remained centrally focused on the views of the politicians at Westminster, and on this showing, seemed incapable of moving outside them.

Survey 4 - BBC "Europe and Us" week Survey February 19 – 23, 2001

- The special programme Referendum Street (BBC1), which produced a 'yes' vote in a mock referendum, did not give viewers enough information to decide whether the exercise had been fairly conducted or was likely to be replicated in real circumstances. There was evidence from Theresa Villiers, MEP, one of the pro-Pound team, that her team was not given access to as many "voters" as the pro-Euro canvassers. ie the programme was unfairly rigged.
- The programme "Churchill the European" (BBC Radio 4) supported the Europhile attempt to re-write history by making Churchill's views part of their case for a more powerful EU. The BBC did not examine this attempt critically or make the listener aware of it in these terms.
- The Nicky Campbell Phone-in (Radio 5 Live) was heavily Europhile in its tone, gave by far the majority of the airtime to Europhile speakers and was not nearly critical enough of the issues involved.

Survey 5 – The BBC and Europe: coverage by flagship BBC News programmes of the General Election 2001 (NB: Not yet seen by the BBC or otherwise published)

- The BBC presented 'Europe' and the Euro mainly as issues affecting the Tory Party alone rather than the Labour Party, let alone the Government or the nation. Labour policies towards Europe were presented on all the programmes tracked as being far less controversial than those of the Euro-sceptic Tories - in line with the reported Labour aim of keeping 'Europe' and the Euro off the main agenda. This indicated two things:
 - 1) a continued editorial mindset of viewing the Euro-sceptic case largely through the distorting prism of splits in the Conservative party which, in turn, were treated with greater significance than they actually warranted.
 - 2) a lack of due scepticism about the Government's determination to keep

‘Europe’ off the agenda (because of differences in policy between Brown and Blair and because of the potential unpopularity of their policies).

- The BBC scarcely mentioned the possibility that there were problems within the Labour party over policies towards the Euro – for example, the widely-reported differences between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown over the timing of joining, which were widely reported in the press. It failed to subject this to anywhere near the same weight of analysis as the differences at play within the Tory Party although the subjection of Government policy to scrutiny should be of more importance than that of a weak opposition.
- The reports of chief political correspondent Andrew Marr – which involved a new style of high-profile impressionistic commentary not previously seen during a British election campaign – were unsatisfactory and skewed. They repeatedly referred to Tory splits without giving viewers sufficient information about the numbers of candidates who differed from the manifesto party line and thus the true and limited importance of what was involved. The picture he conveyed was that large numbers were dissenters. But this was not the case. Mr Marr emphasised this story to the exclusion of other dimensions of the debate about Europe. This approach was picked up and repeated by other BBC correspondents in all areas of the output analysed.
- Jeremy Paxman, officially the BBC’s main interviewer during the campaign, gave both Conservative and Labour ministers such as Robin Cook a tough time over ‘European’ issues but he was, in general, tougher on Conservatives, particularly William Hague, Andrew Lansley and Tim Collins.
- The Today programme embarked on an extensive and dramatised hunt for Tory “dissidents” - Euro-sceptics on one side and Europhiles on the other – while failing to pin down Labour ministers on important areas of policy towards ‘Europe’. In addition, the impact of the programme’s treatment of the tax harmonisation row on May 23 was mainly to undermine Tory claims without sufficient regard to their arguments.
- On PM, there were 11 separate reports about Tory problems on Europe, including one about the alleged “deafening silence” of the Europhiles and claims that the party was on the “loony xenophobic right”. But there was next to no consideration of Labour policies. This amounted to a heavily disproportionate focus in this programme strand on Tory problems. And when there was an opportunity to nail a Labour minister over the Tory claims about the high cost of joining the Euro, the presenter let him off the hook.
- The BBC dealt with Euro-sceptic issues such as withdrawal almost exclusively in terms of their likely impact on Tory splits. There was only minimal analysis of their existence in and effect on other parties. Only one Labour Euro-sceptic, Austin Mitchell, was interviewed in the entire coverage

analysed. Very few Euro-sceptics were interviewed at all during the campaign, other than those from the Conservative Party and UKIP itself.

These findings amount to a catalogue of distortion and misrepresentation. At a time when the powers of the BBC Governors are being called into question, it is vital that total clarity and transparency should be achieved in your response to this research, raising as it does serious doubts about the BBC's impartiality in a crucial area of news coverage.

Our experience has been that, while we have met with a degree of responsiveness to some of the issues raised, there is still a fundamental unwillingness to deal with the most important points. This has extremely disturbing implications for the democratic process and the BBC's role in it, particularly with plans for a referendum in progress. We would therefore urgently request that you, the Director General and the Governors themselves consider in full the reports of Minotaur Media Tracking and that you institute a process to reform the editorial mindset in BBC News and Current Affairs as to how they deal with 'Europe' and the issues involved.

To assist this process, Minotaur Media Tracking would welcome the opportunity to present the key points of its findings to you and the Governors, and to answer any questions which you or they may have.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Lord Pearson of Rannoch

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