

Sir Robin Biggam

Chairman,

Independent Television Commission,

31-33 Foley Street,

London, W1P 7LB. 20th January, 2000

Dear Sir Robin,

Minotaur Media Tracking's Report of the ITC Licensees' national news coverage of the European Election – 9th May 1999 – 12th June 1999

Thank you for your reply of 12th January 2000 to our letter of 16th July 1999, with which we enclosed the Minotaur Report as above. Thank you, too, for passing on the responses of ITN, Channel Four and Channel Five and GMTV.

We welcome your (somewhat reluctant) acknowledgement of the report's findings:

- that the overall volume of coverage was too low and should be more in future elections
- that there was too little coverage of the minority parties.

We attach Minotaur's response to the remainder of your comments. It points to a number of unresolved issues which should be of concern to you as the independent watchdog of ITV's programme standards and which we submit do require further consideration by you.

For our part, we cannot accept your suggestion that the authors' methodology was flawed. The 600 hours of broadcasting upon which their conclusions are based are recorded, transcribed and analysed. They are available for any researchers to examine.

Your licensees seem to be blissfully unaware that about half the British people now appear to favour leaving the EU altogether, and that there are sound economic and political arguments for the UK to stand alone or to join an expanded NAFTA. (More than 60% appear to be against abolishing the pound and joining EMU). Yet, given your treatment of UKIP, this wider perspective was simply not examined during your

coverage of the Euro-elections.

This Euro-sceptic attitude from so many of the British people is understandable when one considers recent research which suggests that only 10% of our economic activity may be involved with the EU (declining and in deficit), with a further 10% being involved with the rest of the world (increasing and in surplus), and the remaining 80% taking place within the UK itself. We enclose a recent Global Britain summary of this (and we note that Anatole Kaletsky has reached the same conclusion – see *The Times*, 7th September 1999).

We also enclose our recent analysis of opinion polls in this country, which we hope you will find enlightening, and a *Daily Telegraph* article of 31st December 1999, which we know to be accurate, which reports the US International Trade Commission's enquiry into the possible advantages of the UK leaving the EU and joining an expanded NAFTA. If your licensees' coverage of the European issue is to be genuinely 'wide-ranging' – let alone 'impartial or fair' – we would have thought that they would give these questions a serious airing with knowledgeable protagonists. Yet, as far as we are aware, you have never done so and, as far as we can judge from your letter, you have no intention of doing so.

The Minotaur survey contains a new and substantive body of material about broadcast news output, which should be a welcome contribution to the debate about broadcasting standards. It is regrettable that you have chosen not to discuss it further. We hope you will reconsider this decision.

In his letter of 14th December 1999 (a copy of which you were sent), we were reminded by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport that the Broadcasting Standards Commission is empowered to consider issues of fairness in programming. We are therefore sending our file to the Commission and to some of the other parties who were clearly damaged by your coverage of last year's European elections.

Yours sincerely,

Lord Stoddart of Swindon (Labour)

Lord Harris of High Cross (Independent)

Lord Pearson of Rannoch (Conservative)

Minotaur Media Tracking

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Response to the Sir Robin Biggam, Chairman of the Independent

Television Commission's letter, of 12th January 2000

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**ITV'S NATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE OF THE
EUROPEAN ELECTIONS, 9TH MAY – 12TH JUNE 1999**

1. Methodology

Our methodology was overt; the transcripts are available to you or any other researchers who care to look at them.

Over the five-week period of the elections all terrestrial **news** programming was listened to, recorded and logged, beginning on May 9th - the day widely accepted in Europe as the start of the election period and clearly the most appropriate day therefore to begin this election study.

Any item concerning Europe was transcribed and timed. Quantification of timings of items was based on the news producers' standard estimate of 140 words per min and was computed accordingly.

We followed a clear tradition of empirical social science research - analysis based on close observation and record. We described and analysed editorial angles and developments over time from a complete and comprehensive set of transcripts.. The report comprised case study material drawn from these of a detailed and systematic form reflecting the main patterns to emerge. To have "codified" this material would have been to obscure rather than elucidate it.

Interviewer, reporters, commentators and interviewees were identified and listed - what was open to quantification was quantified.

2. The Premise underlying the research

We are concerned about ITN's criticism of the premise underlying our survey. They suggest that 'Europe' and 'European' issues were of no concern to the British public during this period. They base this on MORI evidence. We were not aware that MORI polls determined news values and believe that political and broadcast commentators as well as news journalists would be shocked to find they do. However our reading of MORI polls was different, showing 'Europe' to be second only to Health as a concern of the British People. Indeed, a MORI poll at the end of October 1999 found 'Europe' to be the most important issue facing Britain today (22%) ahead of the National Health Service/ Hospitals (14%) in second place. We shall be investigating this further.

3. Academic Comparisons

There have been no recent comparable studies of this order. The Glasgow University Media Group has not published for some time. We would welcome any comparisons and conclusions the ITC Head of Research would care to draw between this and previous studies bearing in mind that the broadcasting environment has changed dramatically in recent years - as has European Union and its political significance for Britain since the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties.

4. Discrepancies in item tallies

We are concerned by the lack of detail provided by the broadcasters to substantiate their very different tallies or counts of items broadcast on the elections and would like to see these items listed and dated to compare with our own clear listing of items in the report made available to you. We look forward to receiving this information.

We also refute Channel 5's contention that we only analysed half their output. We reiterate that we recorded, logged and transcribed, where relevant, Channel 5's substantive news programme output - **two main daily news programmes, 1 pm and 6pm.**

5. Channel Four's **Powerhouse**

As the report made clear it was the broadcasters' public service obligations with respect to **news programming** that were under scrutiny - not documentary or magazine programmes.

6. ITV's Dimpleby Programme

The report documented that speakers from the three largest parties participated - this is not at issue. Your response does not address the real issue of balance. The candidates from the different parties were not treated equally or equably in relation to balance during an election period - contrast the interviews between Redwood and Ashdown in which the former was challenged strongly over Europe while the latter had to actually ask to be questioned about the election.

7. Channel Four News

Careful reading of the Channel Four News transcripts and particularly viewing the tapes does, as the Report asserts, place a serious question mark on Channel Four News' approach to election reporting and on its even handed-ness. The transcripts reveal Jon Snow to be uneven in his treatment of the parties. The ITC's reply and Channel Four's response does not answer the questions we raise on pages 19 and 20 of our report and ignores our observation that only one Euro-sceptic featured in the entire report.

8. ITN Coverage

We find it hard to see how you have arrived at your judgement that Jo Andrews' comments were dispassionate. Her wording was, at the very best, clumsy.

9. The Pro-Euro Conservatives

We did not doubt that the emergence of the Pro-Euro Conservative Party was a newsworthy event. What we questioned was the **prominence** given to the alleged split and to the spokesmen for the Pro-Euro Conservative Party who were featured alongside Conservative Party spokesmen as if of equal importance. The fact that they did not gain a seat was not an issue of "disappointment" to that party but it was an error of news judgement that they received disproportionate news coverage.

Channel Four's contention, and your acceptance of it, that there were no comparable splits in the Labour Party is difficult to understand. It implies a lack of awareness of the Eurosceptic movement within the Labour Party and from the left in general. Prominent figures in the Labour Party (of comparable stature to Kenneth Clarke and Michael Heseltine) have made their "eurosceptic" differences from the government well known. The election period also saw breakaway Labour MEP candidates; a row over the demotion of a Eurosceptic Labour MEP who went independent and the re-emergence of Arthur Scargill's party.

10. Representation of the People Act, section 93

We understand, as do the BBC, that although the Act is not formally in force during the European Election period, a convention exists whereby broadcasters apply the principle of the act. We note with interest that the ITC does not believe that ITV news provision falls within this provision.

11. Conclusion

We are disappointed by the ITC response and it's failure to explore with us the contradictory claims made by the broadcasters. We are curious as to what independent information the ITC had to inform its judgement - had the Commission or its officers monitored this election? More importantly, without our report would the members of the Commission have undertaken any questioning of the commercial terrestrial news programmes during this period?

David Keighley

Kathy Gyngell 18th January 2000

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