

From Sir Robin Biggam,

Chairman,

Independent Television Commission,

33, Foley Street,

London, W1P 7LB.

12<sup>th</sup> January 2000

Dear Sirs,

### **Minotaur Media Tracking survey of European Election coverage**

Thank you again for your letter, previously acknowledged, enclosing the study commissioned by Global Britain for broadcasters' coverage of the European Parliamentary elections. I am sorry for the delay in replying. We sought responses from each of the commercial broadcasters involved, and some of these responses, notably from Channel 4 and ITN, were very detailed.

The broadcasters were uniformly critical of the methodology employed by Minotaur. ITN pointed to the report's misunderstanding of section 93 of the Representation of the People Act, which has no bearing on the allocation of airtime between parties and was in any case suspended for this election. ITN considered that it was amateurish and biased to have started the survey from 7<sup>th</sup> May, when virtually no campaigning occurred before major party launches starting on 17<sup>th</sup> May. ITN further alleges that bias is evident in the assertion that the key live issues of the election were "the withholding tax, the performance and implications of the Euro and EMU, the moves towards greater integration ... and federalism". MORI research showed that the Euro, alone of these, was a major concern to voters, for whom the prime issues were health care, education, unemployment, law and order and the economy. ITN maintains that the number of items carried on ITV between 17<sup>th</sup> May and 9<sup>th</sup> June was 22 and not nine as stated.

Channel 4's response queried what objective criteria lay behind the report's observations that Jon Snow had "managed to trivialise the election" or that "the over riding feeling" of a report was "couldn't care less". The Channel challenges the claim that it broadcast only six items on the election, contending that there were in fact nine packages, six other news items, and three further studio interviews and discussions. Channel 4 also objected to the omission from the report of its **Powerhouse** programmes, which carried the most extensive coverage.

Channel 5 pointed out that the 40 minutes of news per day identified by the report constituted less than half its actual daily output. It stated that while the report referred to three packages, Channel 5 in fact broadcast six in its main evening programme. GMTV

similarly contended that the number of items in its weekday service was six, not the three studio discussions mentioned.

I should say that the ITC shares many of the criticisms of the quality of the report. A commentary by our own Head of Research, made before the broadcasters' submissions were received, ran as follows:

"As the authors say in the brief section on their methodology (page 2 of the main report), the survey is "different from most others that have explored balance because it was based, not on individual items (or incidents), but on an *assessment* ..." and they go on to talk of "*judgements*". It would appear that they constructed no coding frame with which to analyse the output consistently and reliably, and that timings were pretty approximate, although they subsequently express some of their findings in percentages. If the research procedure really was so imprecisely defined – and there is nothing to suggest otherwise – it would be impossible for another research team to repeat the analysis in order to verify the findings, and so the work could not be regarded as scientifically reliable. Unless much more was involved than we are told, the study can be regarded as little more than impressionistic assessment, with a bit of totting-up on the back of an envelope thrown in for good measure: "600 hours of programming was carefully listened to, watched and evaluated".

The impression extends to the output the research analysed, about which we are given no details.

The other major problem with the report is that there are no comparative data on the reporting of other elections, either parliamentary or local, which means that the percentages given appear more absolute and significant than they necessarily are."

Before turning to the ITC's general findings on the issues raised, I will give our response to a number of specific issues raised in the Minotaur report, concerning compliance with the ITC Programme Code.

The most detailed criticisms in the Minotaur report concern Channel 4. It may be simplest, therefore, if I attach for your information the Channel's response to the individual points. Having considered carefully each of the issues raised, it seems to the ITC that the Channel's journalistic approach was probing but even-handed, and we have no grounds to intervene. Similarly, it seems to us that the remark by Jo Andrews on ITV, to which the report's authors take exception, was well within the bounds of proper, dispassionate analysis of news events.

ITV's **Dimbleby** took the decision not to mount a sequence of programmes, dedicated to Europe. Nevertheless, speakers from the three largest parties did participate in the weeks prior to election day. John Redwood was questioned more about Europe than the others – all of whom were subjected to critical questioning of their party's position on various issues. Even with Mr Redwood, however, Europe constituted a minority part. The programme in which Paul Boateng took part was furthest from election day and had least

bearing on the election. Nevertheless, no complaint has been made by the Labour Party and the ITC has no reason to intervene on Code grounds.

Your report is also concerned with what it sees as disproportionate attention to the Pro Euro Conservatives, both in relation to splits on Europe in the Labour Party, and in relation to other small parties. The ITC does not share these concerns. Although the Pro Euro Conservatives' election result may in the event have proved disappointing to them, is undoubtedly the case that their emergence was a newsworthy event. As Channel 4 have said, there were no comparable splits in the Labour Party. What is a matter of more concern to the ITC, however, is the comparatively low level of coverage afforded to a number of small parties with significant political platforms – for example the UKIP and the Greens. We are making this point – with a view to coverage at future elections – to the broadcasters. It mirrors the stated wishes of viewers, according to ITC research after the last general election.

We have also considered very carefully the matter of whether the overall level of coverage was sufficient. The ITC accepts the broadcasters' contention, that it was not as low as the Minotaur report alleges. We are conscious that the war taking place in Kosovo was an event of extraordinary magnitude, that will inevitably have diminished severely the time available to election coverage. We also see some force in ITN's argument that the parties themselves, individually and collectively, were conducting "an unusually low key campaign, with few set piece events and debates, and with the major political figures devoting most of their time to other political issues – Kosovo, devolution and GM foods – rather than dedicating themselves to the European campaign trail". Nevertheless, however little they may electrify the electorate, European elections are themselves matters of considerable constitutional significance. At future elections, where factors such as the war in Kosovo will, one hopes, not apply, we would expect to see the level of coverage increase.

The ITC has explored these issues in some detail, and I am not sure there would be any value in pursuing them further at a meeting. Thank you, nevertheless, for raising the topic with me.

Yours sincerely,

Sir Robin Biggam

#### EXTRACT FROM CHANNEL 4 RESPONSE

- a. That a Channel Four News item was biased because an item on Chris Patten's appointment as an EC Commissioner was **"treated so as to put William Hague in a bad light."** Put simply, this was because the appointment did raise a number of questions about William Hague's performance and judgment. Patten was clearly not Hague's choice. This is not biased, anti-Conservative coverage, just good, informed reporting. As evidence of this alleged bias, the survey argues that in the item **"no inkling was given that this might have been a deliberate Labour attempt to undermine the Tory Party over Europe"**. Without any apparent evidence, the

survey then asserts as fact the news of the potential appointment ***"had all the hallmarks of a carefully timed Labour lobby leak, possibly to embarrass William Hague"***.

The report fails even to consider the possibility that allegations of Labour dirty tricks were not mentioned by Channel Four News because there was no evidence to support such allegations. Channel Four News can only report on the facts, it cannot simply invent them. To do otherwise is irresponsible, potentially libellous journalism.

- b. That an item on the Conservative Party manifesto launch ***"highlights Tory splits and looks at no other issue of substance"***. (Page 20 – main report).

First, it is perfectly reasonable to analyse the potential consequences of the Tory Party's internal divisions over Europe. After all, it was William Hague who sought to carve out a distinct Euro-sceptic position in the Tory election campaign. Given this, it is entirely legitimate to question the coherence and robustness of this key election policy.

Second, contrary to the survey's assertions that ***"there was not an opportunity for a Party spokesman to paint a view of the formal party position"***, the report featured William Hague outlining the Tories formal position on European matters at the manifesto launch and the subsequent question and answer session with journalists. The formal Tory party position was thus absolutely clear to viewers.

Third, after profiling the broad policies of both the UK Independence Party and the Pro Europe Conservative Party, Jon Snow then interviewed Michael Heseltine. The survey asserts this created ***"further problems for Mr Hague" by "further compounding the impression of division"***. (p21 – main report).

Yet, as any objective analysis of the piece reveals, Michael Heseltine clearly and specifically backed William Hague's manifesto launch. Heseltine argued the splinter parties were "wrong to fragment the strength of the Conservative party" and "welcomed debate on these issues".

The 'Global Britain' report's comments about the package on the Euro (1/6/99) are rather perplexing. It is rather difficult to see how this could be construed as 'further efforts to diminish the Tory position'. This was simply a piece of factual reporting on the trouble facing the Euro ... and the implications. Given that Conservative policy is to oppose entry to the single currency for this parliament and next, it is difficult to see how such an item could amount to bias against William Hague and his position. Further it is difficult to see how featuring an independent television company in the report from Ireland about the Euro suggests "the lack of a real commitment in covering the European Elections." Media companies are a key sector in any modern economy.

- d. The 'Global Britain' report suggests that the Channel 4 report and studio discussion about electoral apathy on June 9<sup>th</sup> was a 'dispiriting approach'. In fact, this was perfectly fair and appropriate reporting. There was already survey evidence to

suggest that turnout would be low and, of course, historically, there has been very low voter participation in European Elections in the UK. The 'Global Britain' report then concedes that the discussion also dealt with some of the key issues, like the Maastricht Treaty. But, then, it's suggested that because Jon Snow asked a perfectly legitimate question about what Euro-MPs actually achieve for their constituents, this is "trivialising the election".

Finally, the 'Global Britain' report suggests that Jon Snow was adopting a 'consistent and questionable line' by returning to Tory splits in the discussion. Tory divisions on Europe are not a media invention. They are a reality. Indeed, many would argue that their divisions were a key factor in their defeat at the last General Election. So, to suggest whether at election time or not, that they are not a reasonable area for probing would be ridiculous. The report says that neither of the other two guests were asked about splits. Well, there is no significant split in the Liberal Democrats on this, as far as we are aware. And the evidence of serious divisions in Labour is thin, at least for the present.

- e. The report praises Elinor Goodman's coverage on June 9<sup>th</sup> – but says it was "too little, too late". However, even this criticism seems unfair ... as clearly the eve of the election was the most appropriate time of any for a full analysis of the issues.
- f. Again, on June 11<sup>th</sup> after the election, the report suggests that an item from Toxteth – the area with the lowest turnout – was in some way 'negative' and 'did little to enhance the feeling that the programme was really serious about its European coverage'. The result is that turnout was at its lowest ever for a European Election. And, at least before the results were known on the following Sunday, this was a major story ... as voter apathy was at its most intense in old Labour heartlands. Any "objective" or "open-minded" assessment would surely conclude that the piece posed important, searching questions for New Labour who seemed to have left some core support unenthused. However, 'Global Britain' would have you believe that to invite on to the programme a former "old Labour" activist who articulates a critique of New Labour is somehow "pro-Labour". This is nonsensical and simply not worthy of further comment.