

**From the Rt Hon. Chris Smith, MP, Secretary of State, Dept. for Culture, Media and Sport**

Lord Stoddart of Swindon

Lord Harris of High Cross

Lord Pearson of Rannoch

House of Lords

London, SW1A 0PW.

14<sup>th</sup> December, 1999

Dear Lords Stoddart, Harris and Pearson,

Thank you for copying to me the Report by Minotaur Media Tracking into the terrestrial broadcasting coverage of the European Elections in June. I apologise for not replying sooner, but I wanted to give careful consideration to this issue and allow the BBC and the ITC to complete their own investigations.

As you know, under current broadcasting regulations, responsibility for what is broadcast on television and radio rests with the broadcasters and the broadcasting regulatory bodies – in this case the BBC and the ITC. They are independent of the Government and accountable for safeguarding the public interest in broadcasting. The Broadcasting Act 1990 makes it the statutory duty of the ITC to draw up, and from time to time review, a code giving guidance as to the rules to be observed for the purpose of preserving due impartiality on the part of licensees as regards matters of political or industrial controversy or relating to current public policy. The BBC is also required, under its Charter and Agreement, to deal with controversial subjects with due impartiality.

Within the framework outlined above, it is for the broadcasters to make judgements about the content of individual programmes and the time at which they are broadcast, in the light of the responsibilities placed upon them and of their more detailed programme guidelines. It is a long-standing principle that the Government does not intervene in programme matters, either on arrangements for scheduling or on content.

I have seen Sir Christopher Bland's response to the Report and his reply to the subsequent letter from Minotaur. I understand that the ITC has completed its consultation with the broadcasters over the points raised in the Report and will be writing to you shortly. I look forward to seeing their detailed response, but I am satisfied that the regulators and broadcasters have considered fully the important issues raised in the Report and believe there is little I could add.

As far as I am aware, there were no individual complaints to the Broadcasting Standards Commission which considers public concern about what is broadcast, including issues of fairness in programming.

I am grateful to you for commissioning the Report and raising these important issues. It has been a useful reminder to broadcasters of the need to ensure impartiality and balance, and of their important role in informing the public and stimulating debate.

I am copying this letter to Sir Christopher Bland and to Sir Robin Biggam.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Smith