

From Sir Christopher Bland, BBC

Lord Stoddart of Swindon

Lord Harris of High Cross

Lord Pearson of Rannoch

House of Lords

London, SW1A 0PW.

18th October 1999

Dear Lord Stoddart,

Thank you for your reply to my letter of July 22. I'm sorry that you found it inadequate and disturbing. We took your points and addressed them seriously, but your letter raises some important additional points, so let me now turn to those.

1. You say that the Pro-Euro Conservative Party was given similar prominence to the Conservative Party itself. This was not the case. Our policy, as I explained before, was to give priority to the three main parties (four in Scotland and Wales), but to ensure that the views of the smaller parties, including UKIP, the Greens and the Pro-Euro Conservatives were also covered, though clearly less often. Within those broad categories it was not the role of the broadcasters to pre-empt the judgement of the electorate by deciding which of those small parties would get more support than the others.
2. Our audiences do not draw the hard and fast distinction that the report does between our national and regional news coverage. Because international news, namely the Kosovo war, was rightly dominating the news agenda, the election was fought very much at a local and regional level and that was the context in which the bulk of our reporting took place.

I gave you some examples in my last letter. Let me give you some more, all of which used candidates on air. In none of these programmes was there any suggestion that the Pro-Euro Conservatives were given similar prominence to the Conservative Party itself.

- In the North, the five issue based programmes all contained candidates from the three main parties. There was one feature on the smaller parties which had contributors from UKIP, the Greens, Socialist Labour and the Pro-Euro Tories all of whom were putting up a full list in the region.
- In the South West, Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates appeared in three special programmes. Candidates from four small parties – UKIP, the Pro-Euro Conservatives, the Green Party and the Liberal Party took part in two.
- In the Midlands a debate was staged which gave prominence to the three main parties but included contributions from all others standing in that region.

1. We accept the point you make that Britain's future in Europe is a vital issue and one of great interest to the public; but this campaign was about electing members to the European Parliament, not a pro or anti European referendum. Our task was to ensure that the views of all the parties were properly represented. So, when you ask why *On the Record* carried four senior party interviewees in favour of greater integration with Europe and membership of the Euro against only one exploring a Eurosceptic perspective, the answer is that the politicians were invited onto the programme to represent their parties. It is true that two Labour politicians took part in the three last Sundays of the campaign as against only one from the Liberal Democrats and one from the Conservatives, but in considering whether the programme was balanced over that period it is worth bearing in mind that the interview with William Hague was much the longest of the four at over 23 minutes, and Jack Cunningham was only 12 minutes.
2. In a general election almost all political activity is subsumed in the election campaign. This was not the case with the campaign for the European Parliament. The Westminster Parliament was still sitting, the newly elected Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly were being established, and the war in Kosovo was preoccupying politicians of all parties. In the circumstances, it was right for *On the Record* to interview Alistair Darling on Welfare Reform, Jim Wallace on the coalition in the Scottish Parliament, Ann Widdecombe on Conservative Health Policy and George Robertson on Kosovo.

In conclusion, I can assure you that the Governors of the BBC take very seriously their responsibility to ensure that our news coverage is impartial, wide-ranging and fair. Of course there are always lessons to be learnt from our coverage of any major event, and had the circumstances been different our news programmes could well have reported the issues at stake in this campaign in greater detail. However, compared with the coverage given to the election by the press and other broadcasters, we believe our record was an honourable one.

I do not feel that we would have anything to add to this correspondence in a face to face meeting, but in view of the fact that you have sent your response to members of Parliament, I am placing a copy of this letter in the libraries of the House of Commons and House of Lords.

Yours sincerely,

Sir Christopher Bland.