

Sir Christopher Bland,

Chairman, BBC,

Broadcasting House,

Portland Place,

London, W1A 1AA

1st October, 1999

Dear Sir Christopher,

We refer to your letter of 22nd July which, we regret to say, we found inadequate and disturbing. We therefore asked Minotaur Media Tracking to analyse your defence against their report, and we enclose their conclusions.

We would remind you that Minotaur analysed some 600 hours of terrestrial TV and BBC Radio 4 news coverage of the recent Euro-elections during the period 9th May to 12th June. Their findings included:

- Not a single Labour Euro-sceptic went on air
- Massive concentration on "Conservative splits", with the Pro-Euro Conservative Party (which went on to win 1.2% of the votes and no seats) given similar prominence to the Conservative Party itself
- Minority parties virtually ignored, with the UK Independence Party (which went on to win 7% of the votes and 3 seats) accorded only one negative interview.
- No discussion about the wider issues of the UK's relationship with the EU, and thus about the reasons for Euro-scepticism in Britain
- Only 2% of TV news coverage devoted to the elections.

We fear we should also remind you that you and the Governors of the BBC are responsible to the nation for ensuring that the BBC's news coverage is impartial, wide-ranging and fair. If the BBC's coverage of a national election for the European Parliament is so plainly biased, what confidence can we have that your coverage of any referendum on the Single Currency will be fair?

We mean no disrespect to Ms Sloman, but we feel that the gravity of the charges which we are laying against you and your fellow Governors requires that we meet with you personally and, of course, with any of the Governors you deem appropriate.

We look forward to hearing from you.

With good wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Lord Stoddart of Swindon (Labour)

Lord Harris of High Cross (Independent)

Lord Pearson of Rannoch (Conservative

Minotaur Media Tracking

Response to Sir Christopher Bland's comments in his letter 22 July, 1999 to Lord Stoddart of Swindon, Lord Harris of High Cross and Lord Pearson of Rannoch

(Key extracts of Sir Christopher's letter are presented is in italics, and dealt with sequentially)

1. "Thank you for your letter of 16 July, enclosing the report by Global Britain on the BBC's coverage of the recent elections to the European Parliament."

The report, as its title and inside page reveals, was not *by* Global Britain. It was commissioned by Global Britain from Minotaur Media Tracking, an independent research company. Minotaur Media Tracking is run by two ex-broadcasters with extensive experience of TV news and current affairs, one of whom was previously research fellow at the Centre for Television Research at Leeds University, the other the former director of corporate affairs at TV-am. The research was rigorous, systematic and objective.

2. "May I make it clear from the outset that the BBC does not accept there is a systematic bias in its European coverage."

The terms of reference of the research were clear - to record and analyse European news coverage over a five- week period from May 9th to June 10th. The claims relate to that period alone.

Monitoring and analysis of BBC news programmes ***over that period*** showed evidence of systematic bias and imbalance as exemplified by:

- the elevation of the Pro-Euro Conservative Party (which polled 1.3% of the vote and won no seats) to a level of coverage and status similar to that afforded to the Conservative Party.
- an almost complete avoidance of minority parties. The United Kingdom Independence Party, which went on to win three seats and 7.7% of the vote, was granted just one interview on radio and one brief profile on television, as part of a package profiling the other minority parties.

- A heavy concentration on Conservative splits and
- the absence of figures.
- the ignoring of election broadcasting conventions by On The Record.

Sir Christopher's letter failed to address these serious criticisms of the BBC's coverage.

3. "We cannot therefore accept the underlying argument of the report that fairness in our coverage of the European Parliament election on June 10th depended upon equal numbers of appearances of "pro" and "anti" Europeans. The election was to appoint Members of the European Parliament and the overwhelming majority of candidates were standing on party lists".

This is a blatant misrepresentation of the report. There is no such underlying argument.

The terminology "pro" and "anti" Europeans was not used to support the key findings. The terms of discussion are very clearly set out in the appendix. One of the key questions about bias related to the treatment of the Pro-Euro Conservative Party, which was afforded equal status to the Conservative Party. It was not about equal appearances of so-called pro- and anti-Europeans.

The assumption underlying the research was that a wide range of views exists in the United Kingdom about Britain's role in the EU. The question asked whether the BBC properly and responsibly reflected the spectrum of opinion and issues which were being discussed by the political parties and the candidates in the run-up to the European Elections.

The conclusion reached, after analysing the 120 transcripts of BBC news programme items relating to Europe over this period, was that it did not.

Sir Christopher implies that the BBC's obligations were fulfilled by simply looking at the party lists. The report shows that even if this was their approach to covering the elections, it was not fulfilled. It was a virtually 'faceless' election with few of the candidates interviewed or shown. Had they been, it still would not have been sufficient. It was also the BBC's duty to identify and explore the key issues of the campaign and treat their debate with overall fairness.

4. "Counting appearances, or measuring the duration of appearances by use of a stop- watch has never been a very helpful indicator of the delivery of our Charter obligations to fairness and impartiality."

To suggest, as Sir Christopher does, that the report's conclusions were based primarily on counting is another misrepresentation of the material presented to him.

The research did indeed set out to list the number of appearances of the various

participants in the European debate. Logging the content of the news programmes was part of the survey. The fact, for example, that Brendan Donnelly and John Stevens of the minority Pro-Euro Conservative Party appeared almost as many times as William Hague or leading Tory spokespeople was noted and considered to be significant.

Whilst crude counting is never in itself a measurement of fairness (other factors being treatment of topics, the conduct of the interview, etc), it is nonetheless an unavoidable factor in determining whether different parties are given equal opportunity to put across their standpoint. The RPA recognises this principle.

If this basic indicator of fairness was not employed in the European coverage, it would be nice to know how the BBC does check its obligation for fairness and impartiality.

A full reading of the report makes clear that the main arguments about bias were not based on splitting hairs over the length of *time* given to individual politicians. Rather, they pivoted on the unfair *treatment* given to individual politicians. For example, in the case of the Conservatives, by consistently characterising them as split, and through disparaging remarks about them.

In some cases, like On The Record, it did not require a stopwatch to establish the overt fact that there were twice as many appearances of Labour spokespeople as there were of Conservatives.

The report's conclusions were based on a number of standard measures used in other studies of broadcasting coverage. As well as the timing of items and the relative amount of air time granted to individuals and political parties, the researchers examined the editorial treatment of the items involved - their positioning on the overall news agenda, the choice of commentators, the content of reporter packages and the language of the introductory links and interview questions - what is known in the trade as "news values and news angles."

It is therefore disturbing that Sir Christopher appears to dismisses the whole of the report's findings on the basis of this argument.

5. "The policies in place for the election coverage meant that, among other things, in addition to the wide range of stories mentioned by the Report, the Today Programme covered the manifesto launches of the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the SNP, Plaid Cymru, UKIP, the Pro-Euro Conservative Party and the Green Party".

The grammatical construction of this sentence is such that its meaning is unclear.

However the report clearly documents the coverage of the Party launches, (which was wider than Sir Christopher appears to believe, as they featured not just on the Today programme, but also on most television news bulletins, and

Newsnight). The point made by the report was that this constituted the main part of an overall extremely low level of coverage – just 2% of the news output of BBC television and less than 6% of that on Radio 4. What the report underlines and criticises is the absence of follow-through. For example, a key pledge in several of the manifestos to push for reform of the European Commission was barely touched upon. Equally, there was little attempt to address the wider issues raised by the development of the EU, such as moves towards common taxation policies and an EU superstate. Newspapers reported on developments of these issues as hard news stories during the campaign. It was notable that the BBC chose not to.

6. "Other coverage included a package on the campaign in Northern Ireland; a discussion between the leaders of the Labour and Conservative group in the European Parliament; interviews with all the main party leaders; and an interview with Francis Maude on the apparent weakness of the Euro."

In repeating the short list of items that were broadcast – and which were fully mentioned in the report – Sir Christopher avoids addressing a central and disturbing feature of the findings, namely bias by omission. Central issues of public concern highlighted by the report, which his response does not deal with, include:

- Why Newsnight, the BBC's flagship news analysis programme, had just four feature reports on European issues over this period and only one about the election itself. Despite the Kosovo war the programme did find time to do items inter alia, on body piercing, the misplacement of lottery funds and the drying up of a lake in the Soviet Union.
- Why On the Record, the main Sunday programme, carried more interviews with the Labour party than with the Conservatives and carried four senior party interviewees in favour of greater integration with Europe and membership of the Euro, against just one with exploring a Eurosceptic perspective.
- Why there was just one direct interview with a member of the UK Independence Party and one further mention alongside several other minority parties, against more than a dozen significant appearances by the wholly insignificant Pro-Euro Conservative Party.
- Why interviews with senior members of the Conservative Party were, during the campaign, usually preceded by someone from the Pro-Euro Conservative Party, giving this newly-formed party a political significance which was not borne out, and reinforcing the impression that the Conservative party was split.

7. "Euro Election Call was simulcast on BBC2 and Radio 4 - giving viewers and listeners an opportunity to put their questions about the election direct to the main party leaders."

It is irrelevant that the report ignored these two phone-in programmes. As Sir Christopher should be aware, since the introduction makes it clear, the report deliberately focused on and analysed the main news output on BBC and ITV (not other programmes) because this was the main source of political information for millions of viewers and because there is a public service remit within news programmes to bring comprehensive and balanced coverage (enshrined in the 1990 Broadcasting Act).

8. "The interview by John Humphrys with Romano Prodi in On the Record was conducted during the weekend after the European Parliament confirmed his appointment. It was important that he should be interviewed at length so that viewers should be able to form their own judgement on the man who was taking up the key post of Commission President. It was a rigorous interview, asking tough questions, on amongst other things, a European defence policy, and putting the point that Prodi might be too federalist for UK public opinion."

The interview with Romano Prodi was indeed conducted following his appointment, but it was also held as the opening shots of the election campaign were being fired, as follow-up items in other BBC radio news programmes made clear. The content was a powerful and controversial positioning statement by Mr Prodi, arguing that the EC should have more powers, and, indeed, in future be treated as a government. John Humphrys' questions, though challenging Mr Prodi's views to some extent, were mainly designed to find out what his position was and did not establish an alternative perspective on the way forward for the Commission. The tone of the interview was, by his rigorous standards, unusually emollient.

It is therefore hard to understand why the interview was not regarded as an election-period item which needed balancing with someone – say, from within the European Parliament or from Euro-sceptic groups in the UK (for example, from within the Labour party) - who would have put an alternative view about the development of the Commission in the wake of the biggest scandal in its history.

The report also pointed out that the interview with Mr Prodi stood alone as the only interview with a senior figure from the Commission in the BBC's news coverage during the entire election period. It was an eloquent plea for greater integration and moves towards Federalism. On that basis, too, it is hard to understand why it was not felt necessary to seek out alternative views – or find ways of stimulating balanced debate on Federalism, which, as opinion polls confirmed, is one of the most important issues in the UK's involvement in Europe.

9. "In addition to items mentioned in the Report, the programme (On The Record) also made a film about the minor parties which portrayed UKIP as well organised and running a good campaign, and examined some of the weaknesses of the Pro-European Conservatives." (Unclear here whether Sir Christopher is talking generally about pro-European Conservatives, or the Pro-Euro Conservative Party.)

Sir Christopher is hopelessly wrong in these assertions. We cannot believe that he has seen the piece in question, but if he has done so and stands by his assertions, he plainly has an extremely partial view of impartiality! The exact transcript of the item which Sir Christopher claims showed that UKIP was running a well-organised campaign, is as follows:

Joanne Nadler : The truth, according to the man on the UKIP omnibus, is not dissimilar - Brussels is the root of all evil. From a sporting theme the Party felt emboldened to discipline the European Commission at its London HQ.

(insert: 'We're showing them the red card today')

JN: These Elections, however, are to the European Parliament. They think it's the right information, but do they really believe it'll win them MEPs?

CRAIG McKinlay (Deputy Leader UKIP): I would say it is, frankly, guaranteed; but we need to get our people out on the day to vote for keeping the pound forever and leaving the European Union. I think you will be seeing UKIP MEPs on the morning of June 14th.

JN: For what's supposed to be a nation-wide campaign, the streets of London are getting a disproportionate amount of attention. But this figurehead (apparently the former girlfriend of former Conservative MP Piers Merchant) may be a mixed blessing, as her last campaign outing was in support of a Tory MP, who subsequently resigned.

Contrary to Sir Christopher's assertion that this showed UKIP as running a well-run campaign, it actually disparaged the party and ridiculed it, particularly as the footage included was largely shots of the young former girlfriend of a scandal-hit Tory MP handing out leaflets. Of the minority parties featured, the UKIP spokesman was afforded less time than the Greens, the Socialist Labour party, the Pro-Euro Conservatives or even the Natural Law Party. The piece hardly touched upon what the UKIP actually stood for or why it does so.

Also contrary to what Sir Christopher asserts, the package did not go on to point out some of the weaknesses of the Pro-Euro Conservatives. This is what it actually did say:

Joanne Nadler: Of course, injecting a little sex-appeal into a campaign is nothing new, but pro-Euro Tory John Stevens may miss the point by targeting people below the voting age - although it is territory his anti-Euro opposition seemed keen to fight over.

(Insert, campaigners arguing in the street)

Voice 1: Handing out these shabby notes, that are going down in value all the time.

Voice 2: The Euro's competitive. It's good news if you're on the continent, it's bad news for us, we've got overvalued Steirling.

You know who's going to win!

JN: Though for once winning isn't everything for the newly-formed pro-Euro Tories.

JOHN STEVEN