

**From the BBC Chairman**

July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1999

Lord Stoddart of Swindon

Lord Harris of High Cross

Lord Pearson of Rannoch

House of Lords

LONDON

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Dear Lord Stoddart

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. I understand your concern at what you perceive as significant elements of partiality or bias; at the amount of news output devoted to the elections; and about balance both in the political content of some programmes and the treatment given to some parties. We have considered carefully what the report has to say and we are grateful to you for giving us an opportunity to respond.

May I make it clear from the outset that the BBC does not accept that there is a systematic bias in its European coverage. Our main priority at election time is to achieve due weight in our coverage both of the larger parties and of those other parties who put up a full list of candidates. On this occasion these included the Greens, UKIP and the pro-Euro Conservatives.

We cannot therefore accept the underlying argument in the report that fairness in our coverage of the European Parliament election on June 10<sup>th</sup> 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.

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. However, 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 Liberal Democrats, the SNP, Plaid Cymur, the Pro-Euro Conservative Party and the Green Party.

Other coverage included a package on the campaign in Northern Ireland; a discussion between the leaders of the Labour and Conservative groups in the European Parliament; interviews with all the main party leaders; and an interview with Francis Maude on the

apparent weakness of the Euro. The *Nine O'Clock News* carried pieces on the manifesto launches of UKIP and the Green Party as well as the main parties. *Euro Election Call* was simulcast on BBC 2 and Radio 4 – giving viewers and listeners an opportunity to put their questions about the election direct to the main party leaders.

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.

In addition to the items mentioned in the Report, the programme 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.

Throughout this period the news was dominated by Kosovo. There were generally four or five pieces on the *Nine O'Clock News* every night on the war, which inevitably meant that coverage of the election was less than it would have been in normal times. For weeks NATO and not the EU institutions were the focus of attention in Brussels.

The war also absorbed the time and energies of the politicians. This factor, combined with the recent elections to the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly in Wales, as well as local authority elections, meant that the campaign on the ground was a low level one, and in itself generated very little hard news. This was reflected in the press as well as on television and radio.

The report says that it covers all terrestrial news, but makes no mention of the BBC's programmes in the Nations and Regions which provided comprehensive news and feature coverage of the election campaign for local audiences throughout the UK.

Regional Broadcasting's two Brussels-based journalists provided reports at the start of the campaign for each regional television news programme about the work of the Parliament and Britain's place in Europe. They then reported from nine European capitals for thirty of our local stations on attitudes to the Parliament across Europe.

All three Nations and all ten BBC Regions devoted at least one of their weekly political television programmes to a round-table debate about key European issues.

On BBC Radio we supplemented local news coverage of the campaign with studio debates and phone-ins. BBC Radio Lancashire's hour-long special debate on 7 June was typical. Representatives of the three main parties formed the studio panel, but there were also telephone contributions from UKIP and the Greens. In addition to their English language programmes on Radio Wales, BBC Wales provided Welsh language discussions on Radio Cymru and S4C.

The BBC makes no apology for having devoted substantial air time to explaining the new voting system with its large ballot paper. Indeed we think it is part of our public service

remit to have done so.

The report refers to the Representation of the People Act, saying it provides that "*broadcasters give equal time and consideration to the candidates standing*". In fact, Section 93 of the RPA only refers to constituency reports and says nothing about equal time. It did not apply to this election. Instead, it was replaced by a voluntary policy operated by all broadcasters. The policy was followed by all BBC programmes throughout.

The BBC gave the parties more unmediated air time, in the form of Party Election Broadcasts, than it has ever done before: 66 broadcasts on BBC1 and BBC2 shared amongst 19 different parties across the UK. Parties were of course free to use these broadcasts to talk about issues but few chose to do so.

As the report acknowledges, the BBC gave more coverage to the European election than other broadcasters. That coverage was spread across the whole range of programmes on both radio and television. Issues about the European Union and Britain's participation in it will continue to be important as well as controversial and we will ensure that our coverage of all sides of the debate is robust and impartial.

I have tried to give you as detailed a response as possible to the issues the report raises. If, after reading my letter, you continue to feel that a meeting might be helpful, may I suggest that our Chief Political Advisor, Anne Sloman, would be the best person to answer any further queries you may have. She is responsible for advising BBC programme makers on matters of editorial policy in our political coverage and would be happy to hear from you should you wish to contact her. Her direct line is 0171-765 5726, or you can write to her at the above address.

Yours sincerely,

Sir Christopher Bland.