

# GLOBAL BRITAIN

in the wider world



## Press Reports

of the Minotaur broadcasting survey

See also below

- [Biased Today](#) ... by Janet Daley, *The Daily Telegraph*, July 20, 1999

THE SUNDAY TELEGRAPH, July 18, 1999

### Broadcasters 'show pro-Euro bias'

BROADCASTERS are accused of being politically biased in favour of European federalism in a detailed analysis of programming to be presented to the chairmen of the BBC and Independent Television Commission this week. In an independent study that will fuel the debate about BBC impartiality, research into more than 600 hours of news coverage during last month's European Parliament elections shows that Euro-sceptic opinions were given far less airtime than those supporting closer links with the European Union.

The BBC and other terrestrial television channels were also guilty of minimising the importance of the poll by devoting less than three per cent of news programming to the campaign and European issues, claims the study which was commissioned by a cross-party research group.

When the report is presented tomorrow, Sir Christopher Bland, the chairman of the BBC, and Sir Robin Biggam, his counterpart at the ITC, will be told that their organisations are failing in their duty to provide balanced and impartial news.

Researchers were commissioned by Global Britain, a Euro-sceptic group of peers, academics, businessmen and journalists launched last October to stimulate debate about Britain's relations with the EU. The researchers from Minotaur Media Tracking monitored all news output in the five weeks until June 13, three days after the poll, on BBC television, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 and on BBC Radio 4's Today programme, documenting examples of bias on most programmes.

Analysis of coverage of the main parties showed that stories about the Conservatives concentrated on splits. In contrast, items on Labour made no mention of Euro-sceptic opinion within the party. Among smaller parties, the Pro-Euro Conservative Party, which won 1.3 per cent in the poll and no seats, was given far greater prominence than the UK Independence Party, which won 7.7 per cent and three seats, the report said.

Programmes consistently favoured interviews with figures who favoured European integration. In one example, the BBC's On The Record political programme featured five interviews with politicians identified as favouring greater integration - Romano Prodi, Margaret Beckett, Paddy Ashdown, Jack Cunningham and Sir Leon Brittan - and just one Euro-sceptic, William Hague.

The researchers also kept a detailed log of the airtime given to the elections during 435 television news programmes and 175 radio broadcasts. Just five hours out of a total of 375 hours of terrestrial television programmes were devoted to the elections, which has been criticised as inadequate even at a time when the war in Kosovo was dominating the headlines.

BBC television news carried a total of 25 items on the elections, of a maximum two and half minutes long, a total of 2.5 per cent of total news broadcast time, the survey found. ITV news, provided by ITN, transmitted just nine items, amounting to less than two per cent of its output.

Channel 4 came in for even more criticism, after carrying just six items about the election on its flagship bulletin, Channel 4 News. The report said: "Jon Snow, the main presenter, appeared at times flippant in some of his treatment of the election issues." GMTV and Channel 5 were accused of virtually ignoring the elections.

The report said producers appeared to have decided at the outset that the election, which had a record low turnout of 23 per cent, was not important to voters. Several items were devoted to the size of the ballot paper rather than the issues.

Letters signed by the three founders of Global Britain - Lord Stoddart of Swindon, a Labour peer; Lord Harris of High Cross, an independent; and Lord Pearson of Rannoch, a Conservative - will be delivered to the BBC and ITC chairmen with copies of the report tomorrow.

The letter to Sir Christopher Bland will say: "If this survey is accepted, it must follow that the BBC is failing to provide a news service which meets the corporation's stated objectives." The report will increase pressure on the BBC after years of criticism that it has a Left-wing bias.

With concerns about impartiality heightened by the appointment of Greg Dyke, a prominent Labour supporter, as the BBC's director-general, the Conservatives have appointed their own media watchers.

Yesterday, Lord Pearson told The Telegraph: "This clearly a breach of the Broadcasting Act and an outrageous abuse of the licence fee. There seems to be a culture in the BBC that assumes the European Union is wonderful and doesn't allow the Euro-sceptics to get a look in. We decided it was time for a professional, independent study."

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THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, Tuesday July 20, 1999

## **Biased *Today*, biased yesterday ... and biased again tomorrow**

*by Janet Daley*

This report about the European election coverage is a shocking read, even for those of us whose intuitive judgments are confirmed by its conclusions

SO I wasn't being paranoid after all. How reassuring to know that, after all those weeks of shouting at impassive televisions and oblivious radios, I was not losing my mind. Or, at least, if I was, it was not without cause. Here it is in voluminously documented detail: a research study, published this week, monitoring 600 hours of news and current affairs broadcasting during the European election campaign. Yes, indeed. The coverage of the election, such as it was (for one of its most striking features was its absence), seemed designed to minimise the significance of voting at all, to neglect or obscure all the broader issues that the election raised (even when it became clear that the result would have considerable symbolic import), and to give disproportionate exposure to anything that could remotely be regarded as disadvantageous to the Tories specifically and to the Euro-sceptic case generally.

The monitoring group, Minotaur Media Tracking, recorded and assessed all the news bulletins on BBC1, BBC2, BBC Radio 4, ITV and Channel 5 over the five weeks from May 9 to the election date of June 10. Their findings are a shocking read, even for those of us whose intuitive judgments are being confirmed. During the five-week period, television devoted only two per cent of its news bulletin time to the election; Radio 4, arguably the BBC's flagship news and current affairs outlet, gave it only six per cent of its news output. Even allowing for the fact that the war in Kosovo dominated the news agenda, that is a deplorable statistic, considering the importance of the debate on Europe and the single currency in domestic political life. And even that share of airtime gives an overgenerous impression of the seriousness with which the issue was treated, since a proportion of the news items was actually devised to show how boring and irrelevant most people found the subject of the

election: a classic case of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When the broadcasters were not actively stirring up apathy, they were busily scraping the barrel for "Tory split" stories. Considering how little time overall was being given to the European election, a quite astounding amount of it was lavished on the two (count 'em) defecting Tory MEPs who - having effectively been deselected on a party ballot - stalked off to set up their own outfit, the Pro-Euro Conservative Party. This two-man band, consisting of John Stevens and Brendan Donnelly, who were virtually unknown to the public, was treated throughout the campaign as a major, world-class political phenomenon whose existence was a threat not only to the Conservative vote in the election, but also to William Hague's leadership. Instead of treating the PECP as a tiny dissenting fringe, roughly analogous to Arthur Scargill's Socialist Party, the BBC in particular persistently cited it as proof that the Tories were fatally divided on Europe - even though the Conservative Party was, in fact, solidly united throughout the campaign.

Fairly typical of the BBC's analysis was a news report on May 9 by Nicholas Jones, a political correspondent: ". . . because of the party's continuing feud over Europe, the Tories' chances of a continued recovery in next month's European election are clouded in uncertainty. The PECP leader, John Stevens, said William Hague was mad to have ruled out British membership of the euro [until] the next parliament. He predicted that the Tory vote would drop to 25 per cent and that it would be the end of Mr Hague." Yes, well. Heh, heh. In the end, the PECP got 1.3 per cent of the vote and no seats at all. So total was the oblivion into which it and its scratch army collapsed that it plunged the entire Tory Euro-enthusiast camp into a miasma of recrimination and disarray.

While the broadcasters were queueing up to relay the wishful thinking of the PECP's two over-exposed spokesmen, another fringe group languished forlornly in the shadows. The UK Independence Party - which ended up polling 7.7 per cent of the vote and winning three seats - was treated unambiguously as an absurd lunatic fringe. In the only interview of a UKIP spokesman during the campaign - by Nigel Farage on the Today programme - it was clearly implied that the party was linked to the British National Party. Another fascist slur occurred after the election when, having won their famous victory, the Conservatives were subjected to the unsustainable allegation that they were planning to align themselves with an Italian party which (in the words of a BBC presenter) "is seen by many other people as being a direct successor of Mussolini".

This charge was based entirely on a claim by one member of the said Italian party that she had met last spring "with some members of the Conservative Party". Of course, the story was dismissed by the Tories and eventually dropped, but not before the Labour MEP Pauline Green had been given the chance to assert on air that this (non-existent) alliance was one more indication that William Hague had moved the Tories further and further to the Right and that "centre and moderate Conservatives must look now with horror at where the Conservative Party in Europe is going".

On it goes: the undeservedly famous intervention by Sir Julian Critchley - described constantly by broadcasters as "a Tory grandee", although he has never held either a ministerial or a shadow ministerial post - in which the great man's languidly expressed objections were treated as signifying a major party schism. Oh, dear. How drearily repetitive it all is. Every Tory dissenter - however insignificant - is a king across the water, while distinguished Labour Euro-sceptics such as Lord (Peter) Shore, who was a government minister, remain invisible. Euro-sceptics generally and Tory spokesmen particularly are repeatedly hectored with "have-you-stopped-beating-your-wife?" questions. Consider Sue MacGregor's question to John Maples on May 10: "Won't you get more votes if you came [sic] out more strongly against Europe - what you are doing now is giving the impression of sitting on the fence and preventing a split which we know is there for the asking for the Tory party?" So which is it? Are the Tories moving so far to the Right as to be courting neo-fascism or are they "sitting on the fence"? It depends on which news programme you heard.

Global Britain, the cross-party group that commissioned this report, yesterday delivered copies of it to Sir Christopher Bland, chairman of the BBC, and Sir Robin Biggam, chairman of the Independent Television Commission, with requests for meetings to discuss its disturbing findings. Watch this space.

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