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Editor Today
BBC Radio 4
BBC Westminster
4 Millbank
London SW1P 3JA

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Dear Mr. Thomas,

Complaint UKIP broadcast on the Today programme at 7.32am on May 30, 2009

The interview, by the standards of others broadcast during the European Parliamentary elections, as unfairly and relentlessly negative towards the party and gave undue prominence to claims that its policies were racist.

Issues:

Were any features on Today equally tough with other candidates/parties standing in the European Parliamentary elections? If so, where were they?

Did Mark Mardell, or any other BBC correspondent, make a negative comment about any other party than UKIP based on the colour of one of the candidate's skins?

Why was the simplistic and highly derogatory assumption made in the framing of questions to Mr Farage that control of immigration is equated with racism or that it meant that UKIP was "BNP in blazers"?

Were questions put with equal prominence to candidates of all parties with existing MEPs about irregularities in their MEPs' expenses? If not, why not?.

Were words equivalent in a derogatory sense as "weird" used to describe any other political party in the election? If not, why not?

Why were the policies of the Green party not subjected to the same degree of scepticism as were those of UKIP?

The introduction was unduly disparaging to UKIP, in that it stressed that it was seen as a "fringe party". In EU terms, it became "mainstream" at the 2004 elections in that it commanded the third highest share of the vote. The phrase "doesn't have a single Westminster MP" was couched to deliberately add to the negative tone. UKIP, in securing European parliamentary seats, had done better than any other minority party since Britain had joined the EU. Why was this not mentioned instead or in addition?

Mark Mardell knocked UKIP from the start of the piece by also disparagingly describing supporters as providing not a sea, but a "pond" of Union Jacks. What was the need for this? It came across as a contrived attempt to belittle the party.

Continued Over

His first question and response, “what have they achieved – not their main ambition of getting the UK out of the EU”, was presented as evidence for UKIP failure. This was further unjustified negativity and an inappropriately contrived accusation of “failure”. Mr Mardell knew full well that any such expectation of withdrawal, even if it was held by the party, was unattainable in practical terms because of factors outside its control - not least of which was that the Government, and Conservative and Lib Dem opposition would not even discuss the possibility (and the BBC appears determined not to do so either – see Lord Pearson’s correspondence with your Chairman).

In his next statement, that most members of the European Parliament regard UKIP “as profoundly unserious pranksters with a weird obsession,” Mr Mardell was passing on unfiltered and unqualified opinion from political enemies. How could a party which commanded 16% of the national vote in the UK be legitimately described as weird? A political correspondent should not descend to reporting gratuitous abuse.

The remarks of Robert Kilroy-Silk were presented out of context in such a way that they were ambiguous. The intention was plainly to add to the general impression of disparagement of UKIP’s aims. What was he saying was a “criminal betrayal”? The listener could not possibly know.

Mention of Kilroy-Silk’s orange complexion was gratuitously offensive and should not have been included. It added to the sense that Mr Mardell was determined to ridicule anyone connected with UKIP in any way possible. Would he include such descriptions about people of Chinese or Asian ethnicity?

The David Cameron remark, that UKIP members were “fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists” was made in April 2006 in response to claims from UKIP that the sources of some Conservative party donations should be investigated. It was a piece of crude political abuse, for which UKIP demanded an apology. For Mark Mardell to resurrect it here, three years later, as a general indicator of opinion of UKIP, added to the impression that he was scraping the barrel in his intention to be deliberately negative about UKIP in every way he could.

The negativity was made worse in the amplifying and reiteration in the next two sentences of claims that UKIP was “far right”, linked to BNP, and racist. There was no attempt to balance this with a summary of the party’s own claims about where they stood and what they were aiming to achieve.

Mr Mardell also deliberately sought, without a word of explanation or justification, to bracket UKIP’s policy of opposition to unlimited immigration with racism and the far-right. This is exactly the sort of abuse that UKIP’s opponents constantly seek to make stick.

Mr Mardell next deliberately linked UKIP with expenses irregularities and criminality and exaggerated their prevalence. He pointed that “one had disappeared from the scene”, one had been jailed and one was awaiting trial, the impression given that all three were corrupt. In fact Robert Kilroy-Silk left of his own accord after political disagreements, Ashley Mote was found guilty of benefit fraud in the UK (nothing to do with the EU parliament), and only the third, Tom Wise, was linked with EU-related fraud. Afterwards, he was immediately dismissed from the party, unlike others in the Conservative party. UKIP’s record was therefore possibly better, and certainly no worse than the other parties.

Mark Mardells' assessment of UKIP's record of work in the EU Parliament was also deliberately negative and over-egged. He brought to the forefront claims by its enemies that it had voted "against Britain's interests". This entirely missed the point about UKIP, that it sees itself as the only British party in the parliament which does properly represent British interests in areas such as fishing.

To emphasise in this way that they had missed legislation added to the impression that he deliberately wanted to attack UKIP from any angle he could. The idea that UKIP's MEPs could possibly keep track of all EU legislation was absurd. In framing this charge, the BBC's Europe editor showed either a gross misunderstanding of the scale of the task involved, or was deliberating misleading. UKIP may itself have mentioned this, but Mr Mardell's picking up of this point and using it against the party was maliciously negative. His antagonism was amplified by his decision to stress that UKIP did not "boast of achievements". This was clearly meant to be another charge against the party – but why?

Mr Mardell claimed, in his concluding assessment of UKIP, that they were "old school", "golf club militants"; "constantly in danger of being expelled"; "boys who did not make prefects because they were too ready to cock a snook". This was all highly patronising and disparaging in its tone, as can be verified by listening to the tape. His conclusion was equally disparaging: that UKIP risked making withdrawal look like a lost cause for mavericks in a parliament that was "about quiet conciliation rather than gestures". This was highly biased, negative opinion, the like of which was not levelled at any other party standing in the election.

The interview that followed of Nigel Farage by John Humphrys focused on only three main areas: whether UKIP had

- Improperly claimed and used MEP "expenses" (which were in fact allowances common to all MEPs. This was a key "misunderstanding" in all the interviews with Nigel Farage during the election period)
- Racist immigration policies – it was the "BNP in blazers"
- Been ineffective in the European parliament

Finally, Mr Humphrys asked if UKIP would pull Britain out of the EU if it did well in Westminster elections.

Broadly, the line of questioning was very similar to that in an interview of Mr Farage by James Naughtie on May 8. It thus seemed that Today's main editorial aim with respect to UKIP was to link party policies with racism.

The aim on May 30 was clearly to afford Mr Farage an opportunity to respond to some of the other the negative points raised by Mr Mardell. Mr Humphrys gave Mr Farage reasonable scope to answer and explain. But it was a very narrow tack. The hostile approach adopted meant that the interview was anchored firmly in negative perceptions about UKIP, and Mr Farage had little scope to expand his points about party policy, for example in relation to withdrawal.

This was especially so with regard to immigration, where John Humphrys suggested that they would "scrap with the BNP" for votes, a direct insinuation that the party had racist policies. This was exactly in line with what UKIP's opponents wanted to project about the party. Mr Humphrys could have asked tough questions about immigration without pushing into the territory of racism at all. That he not did so was inequitable and added to the

impression that the overall aim of the feature was to deliberately cast UKIP in as negative light as possible.

By contrast, the Green Party has a policy that many would regard as “extreme” on immigration, in the sense that they want to sharply reduce border controls and increase numbers from all over the world who would be allowed to settle in the UK. Caroline Lucas, the party leader, was not asked about this in a hostile manner equivalent to that adopted towards Mr Farage when she appeared on the programme on June 3.

Instead, she was asked in the opening question what “people get” if they voted Green. This gave Miss Lucas a clear framework to outline her party’s policies – something that was not afforded at all to Mr Farage. The attitude towards Miss Lucas was altogether less adversarial. She was asked, for example, whether the adoption of proportional representation would lead to the party having a “serious presence” in Westminster. By contrast, John Humphrys said bluntly that UKIP “had made no impact on Westminster elections thus far”, implying that their electoral success in the European parliamentary elections would be limited by their lack of real popularity.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Malcolm Pearson".

Malcolm Pearson

JOHN HUMPHRYS: If we are to believe the opinion poll in The Times this morning, UKIP will get more votes than the Labour Party in the European Election. A result like that would obviously be calamitous for Gordon Brown, but what effect in the long run would it have on UKIP – seen as one of our fringe parties, perhaps? It won a dozen seats at the last European elections, but doesn't have a single MP at Westminster and, more important still, what effect would it have on our future in the European Union. I'll be talking to its leader in a moment, but let's hear first from our Europe Editor, Mark Mardell.

MARK MARDELL: A small sea, more like a pond perhaps, of Union flags drop in front of a diminished group of men in the European Parliament. They thought their election heralded a revolution, but what have they achieved? Not, obviously, their main ambition of getting the UK out of the EU. Most members of the European Parliament regard UKIP as profoundly unserious pranksters with a weird obsession. 'Criminal betrayal' – so said UKIP's rising star Robert Kilroy-Silk MEP, the former Labour MP and daytime TV host, he's the man with the orange complexion, you'll remember, before he quit the party. 'An incompetent joke' – that's the verdict of another leadership contender. The pronouncements of sore losers, perhaps, but there's something of a theme here which real opponents have been quick to pick up on: 'fruitcakes, loonies, closet racists' was what David Cameron said about them, and it's the last bit that annoys the current leadership. Nigel Farage has dismissed the idea that they're the BNP in blazers, but their main plank in this election is perhaps their opposition to unlimited immigration, and Mr Farage admits he's spent a lot of time and energy fighting off a take-over by the far right. That must say something about the sympathies of some members. And what about the MEPs? Of the dozen elected, Robert Kilroy-Silk has disappeared from the political scene and two others have been expelled, one jailed for fraud, the other awaiting trial on similar charges. UKIP condemns the EU gravy train, but a good proportion seem to have prominent gravy stains all down their blazers. The European Parliament, for all it's bad reputation, is a place where the politicians have a serious job modifying, tweaking, even kicking out proposed new laws. UKIP don't boast of any achievements on this front, and their opponents say they've voted against Britain's interests in a host of areas from fishing to trade talks. A UKIP news release ruefully admits that occasionally UKIP do miss pieces of legislation. If not the BNP in blazers, then there is something of the golf club militant about UKIP – so old-school they're in constant danger of being expelled, the boys who didn't make prefects because they were too ready to cock a snook and put two fingers up at the establishment. But there's no doubt there is a market for this at the moment, but in a parliament that's about quiet conciliation not gestures, they make a lot of noise, no one is unaware of their cause. For them the risk is that they become part of an institution they despise, the licensed court jester, who can poke fun at the EU's po-faced pretensions, as long as they make withdrawal look like a lost cause for mavericks.

JH: Mark Mardell there. Well, Nigel Farage is the leader of UKIP, he's on the line, good morning to you.

NIGEL FARAGE: Good morning.

JH: Let's deal with that bit about the gravy train first. You yourself have done rather well out of it haven't you?

NF: Certainly not. I've given up a career in the City of London, I would be earning substantially more money than I am now, but the point is, UKIP MEPs are not in this for a career, they're not in this for money, they're in it because they absolutely believe that we've got to have a different relationship with the EU, one that is based on . . .

JH: (*interrupting*) Alright, we'll come that in a minute, the different relationship with the EU, we'll come to that in a minute, you say you're not in it for the money. You have taken, I'm quoting what you said to Denis McShane, the Foreign Press Association asked the other day about your expenses and all that sort of thing, and you said 'it's a vast sum, I don't know what the total amount is, but oh Lord, it must be pushing £2 million'

NF: We don't get expenses . . .

JH: No, no.

NF: We get set allowances.

JH: Indeed.

NF: It's an entirely different system to Westminster . . .

JH: (*speaking over*) Nonetheless, £2 million since you've been there?

NF: Well, every single MEP gets the same, you know, Glenys Kinnock gets the same as I'll get . . .

JH: I know.

NF: And what we have done is we've used that money to campaign up and down the country over the last few years, telling people the truth about the EU, and that perhaps is one of the reasons why there's now a majority of people in Britain who support our view.

JH: Right, so you have used tax payers' money to peddle the interests of your own party?

NF: No, to peddle the interests of our cause. Last year, the EU . . .

JH: (*interrupting*) I'm not sure I see the difference.

NF: Last year the European Union spent €2.4 billion, sorry billions euros, telling students and schoolchildren that the EU was a wonderful thing. All that UKIP has done is take a little bit of money that's been given to us and try to counteract some of those arguments.

JH: I don't know about 'little bit of money', most people would consider two million quid in your case quite a lot of money.

NF: We haven't put it in our pockets, we've used it in our campaigns.

JH: Well, you've paid your wife to help run your office.

NF: For seven years she helped me on an unpaid basis, since I was leader of a group in the European Parliament and The UK Independence Party, she's helped me for the last two years.

JH: The question is what effect you've had and the answer to that is, apart from the fact that you have used a lot of money, spent quite a lot of money to alert people to what you consider the bad things about Europe, in terms of influencing legislation and the like, you have been entirely ineffective, haven't you?

NF: Well, I thought Mark Mardell's report was really grossly unfair. For the first time in thirty years there has been an opposition group in the European Parliament, which has been my privilege to lead over the course of the last five years, we're seen as the focal point for eurosceptic groups right across the continent, we've played a big role in the French referendum, and in the Irish referendum, the day after the 'no' vote, the prime minister in Ireland blamed me personally – and my group in the European Parliament – for the 'no' result in Ireland. I think that's pretty effective opposition.

JH: But what you haven't been doing is sitting there, getting on with the job of being an MEP, and if you run for a post, the post of Member of the European Parliament, surely people who've put you into that expect you to . . .

NF: (*interrupting*) Well I'm sorry, I

JH: . . . to form the part of a constructive opposition. I mean, the line when you say Mark Madell was unfair, but he's right about your news release, admitting occasionally you do miss pieces of legislation.

NF: And so does everybody, just remember John that there are days in the European Parliament where we vote on up to a thousand amendments in the space of sixty or seventy minutes. I mean this is . . . the *mass* of legislation going through is such that nobody from any party could ever tell you they've got every single thing right, but I'll tell you this: unlike the other British parties, we have never voted for any new directive that impacts upon British business, we have opposed it, we have fought hard through parliamentary committees to stop things like the exemption on the 48 Hour Week being removed, we've played our full role as MEPs, but what we do not do, we do not support any European legislation, believing that we should make those laws in this country.

JH: The accusation that you are the BNP in blazers . . .

NF: Well, it's ludicrous.

JH: Because of your . . . well, you are hugely opposed to immigration, any more immigration.

NF: No, we're not opposed to immigration per se, we believe we should control immigration.

JH: Well, everybody says that.

NF: They do, and they're not telling the truth, are they? I mean, this has been the problem, the expenses scandal has drowned all of this out. The British public need to know that what's being done in their name is we've signed up to total, unlimited immigration to the whole of Eastern Europe, and the only party that voted against that was UKIP, and we believe in controlling immigration. The only people . . .

JH: (*interrupting*) But, but, but hang on. You believe in controlling that, a lot of people came in here from Eastern Europe, they did jobs that needed to be doing, now many of them are going back again. What's wrong with that?

NF: Oh, come on. We've still got about 800,000 people net increase from Eastern Europe since those countries joined, and that figure is due to rise. I mean look, a few weeks ago, the President of Romania issued a million passports to people in Moldova. Those people now, if they want, can all come to Britain. Our argument is the British people themselves should decide who comes to live, work and settle in Britain, not the President of Romania.

JH: If you get more MEPs in the European Parliament, if – and it's a very big if – if you do well in the Westminster elections, I say 'a very big if' because you've made no impact on the Westminster elections thus far, when will you pull us out, given a chance when would you pull us out? Would you, would you . . . let's dream for a moment, imagine you were in power, would you pull us out the next day, next week, next month?

NF: The very next day. No question about it. And we would sack ourselves as MEPs and we would then renegotiate a sensible free trade agreement, rather like the one that Switzerland has. This is absolutely vital, it's a majority view in this country, and I believe it will grow. And what I would really like to see is if UKIP can cause an earthquake next Thursday, if we can really send a loud and clear message to the big party leaders, I would like them to go into the next general election promising us, the British people, the right that we can have a referendum to decide whether we're part of this Union or not.

JH: Nigel Farage, many thanks.