

Lord Pearson of Rannoch

Helen Boaden
Director, BBC News
Room 5601
BBC Television Centre
201 Wood Lane, W12



London SW1A 0PW

12thth April 2011

Dear Helen,

I write to complain officially about the BBC's treatment of the question as to whether the UK should stay in the European Union. The complaint is focused on the "Today" programme, which has been monitored in detail since 2002, but it applies to the entire output of the Corporation.

In response to the Wilson Report of 2005 the BBC made a clear promise: *"to offer our audiences across all platforms clear, accurate and accessible information about the way the EU institutions work and their impact on UK laws and life"*. There is no evidence that that promise has been fulfilled. This is a serious failure, resulting in the continuing inability of the British people to understand how a large proportion of the laws which govern their lives are made. To support this contention I attach a letter and enclosures I sent to the Director-General on 3rd February 2011.

As the Corporation's flagship news and current affairs programme, "Today" should have offered over time reasonably detailed and fair coverage of the case for the UK to withdraw from the EU. Its input would have been a vital component in any debate about the EU and its role in our national life. "Today" is a litmus test as to whether the BBC has kept its promise, and indeed has fulfilled its Charter and Guidelines. The attached detailed complaint shows that it has not.

Its analysis, based on half the editions of "Today" over the past six years, shows that the proportion of speakers who favour withdrawal from the EU has significantly fallen, not risen, since the Wilson Report. Such contributors have only rarely been asked for their views about key EU-related issues. For example, only 3 questions were put to them on the Common Agricultural Policy, only 5 about the cost to Britain of EU membership, and very little about specific EU Directives. All these areas were identified by Wilson as important topics where coverage was inadequate.

In the last 6 years, "Today" has put only 17 questions directly about withdrawal to those who support it; there have been only 38 interviews with them, contributing only 6 minutes per annum of interviews in which withdrawal was a theme. Moreover, most of this activity has been 'bunched' around European and General elections.

There does not appear to be any evidence that the BBC has fulfilled its Wilson promise anywhere else in its output, but I would of course be grateful to hear of it if it has.

It could be argued that the "Today" programme is not the ideal vehicle to explain and debate the EU's law-making process: how and why the Commission has the monopoly of proposing and executing all EU law; the role of COREPER (see attached letter to the

Director-General) and the Council of Ministers; the EU parliament (for whose members the British people actually vote, but about whose role they are largely ignorant); the General Court (Court of First Instance) and the Luxembourg Court of Justice; (not to mention the relationship between the Luxembourg and Strasbourg courts).

I fear it isn't good enough to say that it's all too boring to make it interesting. I understand that Anthony Jay wrote two episodes of "Yes, Commissioner" some years ago, which the BBC turned down flat. The "Now Show" managed to make the AV system very entertaining last week, whilst revealing its basic features. So there really is wide opportunity for programmes of an informative and entertaining kind about the EU. They would also do much to protect the reputation of the BBC with most of its license fee payers, who are growing ever more Eurosceptic.

Be that as it may, I attach the specific complaint, and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely -
Malcolm Pearson

Lord Pearson of Rannoch

Copies to: Sir Michael Lyons Chairman, BBC Trust
Fraser Steel BBC Editorial Complaints Unit, BBC Trust
Mark Thompson BBC Director-General
David Jordan BBC Editorial Policy and Standards
Ric Bailey BBC Chief Advisor, Politics

Enc: Letter and enclosures to Mark Thompson, Director-General (3rd February 2011)
This complaint
NewsWatch survey of "Today" output (September-December 2010)