



## **THE EUROPEAN UNION – PERCEPTIONS OF THE BBC’S REPORTING: MANAGEMENT’S RESPONSE**

### **Statement by the BBC Board of Governors**

The Board of Governors has today published BBC management’s response to the Independent Panel report on the BBC’s coverage of the European Union and issued the following statement:

“The Board of Governors welcomes management’s response to the Independent Panel report.

“We noted in January that the Independent Panel found no evidence of deliberate bias, but it concluded that the BBC’s coverage of Europe needed to be improved. Furthermore, we noted that, on the evidence of the MORI research, the BBC was not succeeding in providing basic accessible information on the topic of Europe for licence fee payers and urgent action was needed.

“If the BBC is to maintain the public’s trust in its news service, it has to demonstrate its commitment to accuracy and impartiality. The response from BBC News is comprehensive and, we believe, demonstrates both recognition of that need and a commitment to delivering it.

“When we considered management’s response, we as Governors concluded that the new measures outlined in the action plan would improve the quality of the BBC’s Europe coverage. We were pleased in particular by the decision to appoint a Europe Editor and the renewed focus on training to improve BBC journalists’ understanding of the complexities of Europe. In our discussions with management, we were encouraged by the new arrangements being implemented by the Director of News to involve programme editors in regular discussions about the BBC’s coverage of Europe and the recognition of their important role in driving enthusiasm for improvement.

“As representatives of the public interest, the Governors are responsible for ensuring the BBC’s independence from external pressure that might affect its output, and likewise, for ensuring that its output is impartial. On behalf of licence fee payers, we judge that the changes being implemented address the issues raised by the Independent Panel led by Richard Wilson. The Board has requested management to report on progress of implementing the new measures in the summer, together with a timetable for completion and proposals for monitoring progress over the next 12 months.”

May 2005



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Submitted to the Board of Governors  
March 2005

## **BBC NEWS COVERAGE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION**

### **BBC NEWS RESPONSE TO THE INDEPENDENT PANEL REPORT**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The report by the Independent Panel has contributed significantly to our thinking about how to improve BBC News' coverage of the European Union.

In particular, we recognise the need for greater sophistication in the coverage of the European Union and the value of moving coverage of the debate about the European Union beyond the "Westminster prism". We agree with the Panel's emphasis on improved training for staff. We also accept the need to achieve greater awareness of both the power and role of the institutions as well as issues within the EU and legislation emanating from it. We will certainly learn from the best practice of the World Service. We are well placed to do so having developed much closer ties and collaboration in recent years. We also accept the need for greater accessibility in our coverage to ensure our audiences have clearer information to make informed choices and decisions.

We acknowledge the need to build further on the range of our reporting in order to capture a wide variety of opinions and different strands of argument about European Union issues. Although we have a monitoring system in place we recognise it needs to be strengthened.

There are plans in place for coverage of the proposed Referendum on a European Constitution and draft Guidelines have already been drawn up. But we believe it is premature to put them in place and publish them to staff before the General Election.

We take issue with the Report's suggestion in Paragraph 33(d) that the BBC should cede editorial control on the selection of contributors to the campaign groups which have an interest in Europe. We believe it must always be the case that the BBC has the right to choose who appears in its programmes

This report responds positively to the recommendations of the Independent Panel and sets out a plan for action moving forward, encompassing:-

- developing our strategy for coverage including improved planning
- creative review of the output focusing more on best practice
- more robust monitoring
- new training initiatives
- preparing for a possible Referendum
- proposals for measuring success

## **RECOMMENDATION: OUR STRATEGY FOR COVERAGE AND IMPROVED PLANNING**

***“Need for better and more impartial coverage of the EU...priority to producing a strategy and plan of action...reflecting the importance of the policy issues under discussion... for the lives of the audience...the BBC ethos as a Public Service Broadcaster...the role of the Brussels bureau...an EU Editor.”***

### **Our response:**

As we have set out in *Building Public Value*, the BBC’s purpose is to support civic life and national debate by providing trusted and impartial news and information that helps citizens make sense of the world and enables them to engage with it. In that context, coverage of the EU is a key part of the BBC’s journalism strategy.

With specific reference to Europe our aims are:

- to offer our audiences across all platforms clear, accurate and accessible information about the way EU institutions work and their impact on UK laws and life;
- to ensure impartiality by reflecting the widest possible range of voices and viewpoints about EU issues; to test those viewpoints using evidence-based argument or informed opinion;
- to demonstrate the relationships between the different member states and the European Union;
- to reveal and explain to our audiences areas of contentious fact and disputed principle.

### **Reporting the European Union**

- We will reconfigure the Brussels bureau which is at the heart of our EU coverage.
- We will appoint a Europe Editor based in Brussels. We are taking the opportunity of Stephen Sackur’s move to Hardtalk to redefine his Europe Correspondent post and upgrade it to Europe Editor. The new role will focus on the politics, policy and economics of Europe and the European Union so as to give our audiences an authoritative overview of significant EU stories.
- We will appoint a new Europe Institutions Reporter in Brussels. This will be an additional post, reporting for radio, television and online from the corridors of Brussels and Strasbourg. The focus will be to inform our audiences better about the implications of the EU decision-making process, in particular by spotting significant legislation and directives in good time to enable a full debate in the UK.
- The role of the Europe Institutions Reporter builds on the World Service model, which, through its Europe Correspondent, has shown that having someone consistently covering this area can produce journalistic results as well as raising the profile of the BBC.
- We will redefine the role of the Paris Correspondent who will also cover breaking news stories across Europe from a bureau that retains full TV capacity. This will leave the new Europe Editor in Brussels to focus on EU coverage.

- We will use our network of bureaux in Europe to illustrate a broad range of issues and opinions from across EU member states and to report on events in those countries.
- The Berlin and Rome bureau will be reconfigured to reduce fixed costs and achieve maximum flexibility. Using the latest digital technology for both capture of material and delivery (live and recorded), these bureaux will be able to provide live TV two ways for breaking news and co-ordinate further TV deployments in the field to cover the story.
- We will continue to use our network of radio reporters based in European cities such as Athens and Madrid to give a broad range of coverage from across Europe.
- Since the end of February we have implemented a new EU Planning System to ensure greater co-ordination between departments. Every fortnight, senior editors from Brussels (via conference call), Home Newsgathering, Millbank, Business and Analysis & Research now meet to plan coverage and deployments and to ensure we are not missing important stories.
- As requested, we have weighed the benefits and disadvantages of moving the management of EU coverage from World Newsgathering to Home Newsgathering. We believe such a move does not sit easily with concerns that EU affairs are viewed through a domestic, or a Westminster, prism – indeed we fear it might encourage this to happen. We are also concerned that some might interpret such a move as a political statement. We believe the new London-based EU planning system will address the issues highlighted in the panel’s report.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

***“More care in the selection of interviewees...the test is not a lively confrontation...a more creative approach to representing the spread of public opinion and non-political contributors...audiences should be directed more often to background information”***

## **Our response**

An adversarial approach is the cornerstone of many key British institutions, such as Parliament and the courts. A robust exchange of views is acknowledged not as a way of generating heat but of casting light on a subject. Broadcasting is no different and, at times, confrontation can be both illuminating and entertaining, a view shared by our audiences.

Nonetheless, we recognise that there are many ways of testing arguments and conveying information. It is important that all of these are used and that a range of voices is heard to give full expression to the nuance of the European debate. It is a constant desire of editors and programme makers to bring new voices to their programmes, to eschew the obvious and espouse the counter-intuitive.

- To help editors to realise this ambition we undertake to strengthen further the BBC News Analysis and Research database of contacts on Europe and the European Union and to ensure that it includes a full range of voices of politicians and non – politicians. We will also furnish more information about the standpoint of experts on the European Union.
- We will take steps to bring the BBC News website’s considerable resources of background material to the attention of our audiences whenever appropriate, highlighting particular links on stories where supporting material is useful. We will

strengthen cross-promotion of EU content between radio and tv programmes and Online.

- Decisions taken on EU coverage at our new twice-monthly EU Planning meetings will enable us to flag more effectively upcoming stories and ensure that producers and researchers broaden their approach to interviewees beyond politics alone.
- By further exploiting our existing channel of communication with Nations & Regions - our twice daily conference calls - we will capitalise on the access this affords us to the widest possible range of voices for radio and tv news programmes and bulletins on EU perspectives from around the UK.
- We will build on the success of the News Website's EU content during any referendum campaign. We note that the PDF of the full European Constitution has been downloaded more than 250,000 times in the past six months.

## **RECOMMENDATION: CREATIVE REVIEW AND PLANS**

### ***“Creative review of the output and establish best practice”***

#### **Our response**

We will build, as recommended, on the best practice of World Service, 5 Live and other output such as BBC Scotland's Gaelic language programme Eòrpa. We will also learn from the success of News 24's European Enlargement Week, when, through a series of live days and reports from each of the 10 countries entering the EU, we examined the economic, security, asylum and cultural issues arising from closer integration, and the creative quality of the most thoughtful and contextualised reports on programmes such as Today and Newsnight.

Our plans for additional, specific EU-related programming include:

- Coverage across BBC News of the referenda on the constitution taking place in the coming months in many EU member countries.
- *The Record – Europe*, currently on BBC Parliament and BBC World will be extended to News 24 overnight (also carried by BBC1) and at weekends.
- In the event of a Referendum, Online and News 24 will stage a special Constitution Day. News 24 will report from around the EU to reflect the debate surrounding the draft constitution, while Online will host special interactive forums.
- Radio 4 is running a new series of Crossing Continents in the summer, 2005, and planning a landmark current affairs series on the European Constitution to be broadcast in the run up to the vote of a Referendum.

## **RECOMMENDATION: MONITORING**

***“Implementation will require a robust system of monitoring to ensure a full range of opinions are heard and challenged”***

### **Our response**

We recognise the need for a robust system of monitoring of coverage of the European Union at this time. Attempting to *measure* impartiality is fraught with difficulty. However, we will strengthen our current monitoring system to give more information about the balance within our coverage and the range of interviewees used.

- We have had in place for the last three years a system of monitoring which requires programmes to log their EU-related output. This system will be developed further to ensure that programmes log their output accurately and contemporaneously by subject area and noting the position of key interviewees on issues such as the euro and the draft EU Constitution.
- Editors of individual programmes will be responsible for accurate and timely logging; they will be given access to the full database to use as an editorial tool to enable them to keep a constant check on the coverage of EU issues on their programmes.
- We will assess the monitoring data at the News Editorial Board each quarter.
- Due to the complexity of monitoring this issue we are currently examining different methods of conducting regular qualitative analysis in order to assess content, tone and approach both from an internal BBC perspective and benchmarked against other broadcasters. This is in addition to the quantitative monitoring outlined above.
- We will assess and monitor the level of any complaints about our EU coverage by means of the new complaints system.

## **RECOMMENDATION: NEW TRAINING INITIATIVES**

***“Ignorance amongst BBC journalists...more resources on Training”***

### **Our response**

We recognise that our journalists, as recommended, must be as well informed as possible about the EU, the countries within it and the institutions which run it, to support our editorial objectives around informed citizenship. We will strengthen training.

There is already a significant resource available in the form of background briefs available on the Analysis and Research website on the Constitution alone. We will ensure all our journalists are familiar with this excellent resource.

### **The EU constitution**

- Constitution text
- Bullet point summary
- Guide to key elements
- Deal reached at June 2004 summit
- Background to EU constitution
- Myths and realities

## **The UK and the EU constitution**

- European Union Bill
- UK referendum rules
- British public opinion
- Summary of party positions
- Government White Paper on constitution 9 Sept 2004
- Labour & the EU constitution
- UK government to hold referendum
- Tony Blair announces referendum: statement
- Conservative reaction to constitution agreement
- Referendum: Conservative position
- Howard Constitution referendum statement

## **Debate and ratification in other EU countries**

- Ratification in other EU countries
- Public opinion across the EU

Other resources exist on the Euro and EU institutions, together with lists of contacts and links across the institutions and in the academic community.

In support of our commitment to ensuring our journalists are well briefed and well prepared, we will strengthen our training and information further:

- By September, 2005, we will establish a compulsory interactive online European Union course on learn.gateway – the training area on the BBC's intranet used by all BBC staff. This will form part of a wider range of modules about all forms of policy-making, including the role and remit of domestic local authorities and parliamentary processes.
- We will ensure that over the next eighteen months, output editors, who are responsible day-to-day for what appears on air, go "back to the floor" to produce coverage from Brussels and Strasbourg, to see the institutions and to build contacts with European Commissioners, MEPs, spokespeople and ambassadors.
- Analysis and Research will organise an enhanced programme of open seminars for all staff in the run up to any Referendum to which external speakers across the spectrum of views will be invited.
- The Director of News will e-mail all journalists in News after the General Election to emphasise the importance of being briefed about the EU and its institutions and draw attention to the BBC's on-line EU guide and the Analysis and Research website. She will also highlight the wide range of contact details for interviewees that are available on the A & R website in order to ensure we illustrate the whole spectrum of arguments surrounding the EU.
- The proposed College of Journalism will provide ongoing training on major, complex editorial issues such as covering the EU.



## **RECOMMENDATION: REFERENDUM**

***“Early thought should be given to the Referendum guidelines and make public its plans”***

### **Our response**

A referendum on the EU constitution is unlikely to take place before early 2006. Meetings have been held with the Electoral Commission about the possible timetable and arrangements for the Referendum. Preparations are at an early stage and much has yet to be decided. A series of meetings has also been held with representatives of both sides of the EU debate in the UK.

- The Chief Adviser, Politics will bring formal guidelines to the Journalism Board and to the Board of Governors after the General Election and these will be widely circulated to network journalists and those in the nations and regions.
- Analysis and Research will distribute a summary of the main arguments and counter arguments of both the Yes and No campaigns for all journalistic staff.
- During a referendum campaign, the Chief Political Adviser will stress to programmes the importance of a wide range of voices in the selection of interviewees. As was seen with the referendum in the North East of England on regional devolution, such campaigns require an approach which includes all proponents and opponents of the proposition whether or not they are active politicians. There are also many nuances of opinion within political parties and within the Yes and No campaigns – we will seek to reflect these different perspectives.
- As is always the case, decisions about the use of appropriate interviewees will remain with BBC journalists.
- The new EU Planning System (see above) will play a key role in coordinating coverage and ensuring a joined-up approach to BBC News reporting of the UK referendum. We will in particular ensure that News 24 is the Campaign Network for TV and there will be extensive network collaboration with BBC Nations and Regions
- During a referendum campaign period, we will use a robust monitoring system (see above) to ensure that we are achieving balance
- As with a General Election, we will prepare a Referendum programme grid well ahead of time – to include Political Programmes, Current Affairs and Question Time - which we will use to ensure that we have output across all our outlets that reflects the significance of the Referendum and captures the different arguments.
- We will also maintain a Programme Check List for all our output which ensures that we have covered the full range of debate and argument on air across the Referendum period – as we do with a General Election.

## **MEASURING SUCCESS**

- From mid-March, as part of the Director of News' new monthly Editors' Forums, coverage of Europe will be discussed and reviewed as a regular agenda item. Over a year these meetings will involve editors of all of our programmes and, when discussing Europe, we will particularly draw on the experience of editors of programmes such as *Euronews*, *Europe Today*, *The Record – Europe* and the Europe section of the News website. We will also invite contributions from the Global News Division
- The Director's Editorial Board will have regular updates on any trends from our monitoring system which board members will feed back to editors to correct any imbalances in coverage.
- We are developing a system for assessing our performance in promoting informed citizenship. We expect this to take the form of a regular public survey that will assess the extent to which BBC output, particularly BBC News output, has benefited our audiences in terms of their understanding of current events and their engagement with them. There will be an important European/EU dimension to this study, particularly as we approach a possible referendum on the draft European Constitution.
- We will also make use of other publicly available research, such as the European Commission's Eurobarometer, to track levels of public understanding of EU issues in the UK (where possible, relative to other EU countries), to guide us towards the gaps in our audiences' knowledge.
- We will ensure we conduct research amongst younger audiences to understand their current knowledge of, and attitudes towards, Europe. It will also look at how we might be able to engage their interest and build their knowledge of the issues around the proposed referendum on the Constitution.

Ends.