

BBC NEWS COVERAGE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

INDEPENDENT PANEL REPORT

January 2005

1. Introduction

We were asked:

“to assess the impartiality of BBC coverage of the EU with particular regard to the debate about Britain’s place in Europe, the activities of the EU institutions and accessibility; and to make recommendations for improvement where necessary.”

The Governors particularly asked us to consider four main claims made by those who criticise the BBC’s coverage of the EU, namely that:

- i. the BBC is systematically europhile
- ii. anti-EU, pro-withdrawal voices have been excluded from BBC coverage
- iii. BBC coverage of the EU is seen too much through a Westminster prism with the result that significant EU developments go unreported and
- iv. BBC reporting has failed to increase public understanding of EU issues and institutions and their impact on British life, thereby contributing to public apathy.

We have received written submissions from a wide range of groups and have talked to representatives from a sample of them, although we only had limited time for this.

Our report and recommendations are attached. There are just three general points we would like to make to set the scene.

1. First, coverage of European issues is of great and increasing importance for the BBC. We know that the Corporation regularly comes under pressure to give prominence to new topics of concern or perhaps fashion. But Britain’s place in Europe has been a dominant issue at the heart of British politics for half a century, remaining a matter of debate and controversy for far longer than almost any other major issue in public life. Many newspapers and other media have committed positions on Europe. The public themselves feel ill-informed. Much is at stake. As the public service broadcaster, the BBC bears a heavy responsibility for raising the level of public awareness and understanding of EU matters without itself taking sides in the debate. We think it needs a conscious strategy to achieve this.

This role is a long term challenge but its significance will intensify temporarily in the coming months. It is going to be of particular importance to the BBC to ensure that its coverage of EU matters is excellent, impartial and seen to be impartial, in the run-up to the Referendum on the EU Constitution. A referendum period makes unconventional demands on broadcasters, in that balance consists of giving equal treatment to the Yes and No campaigns rather than to Government and Opposition spokespeople. The Referendum on the EU Constitution will free voters from Party affiliations, introduce non-politicians to the political arena and divide the loyalty of parliamentarians. Party politicians will no doubt play a prominent role but there needs to be clear recognition of the difference between direct democracy and representative democracy.

2. Second, while we have found no evidence of deliberate bias in BBC coverage of EU matters, we have found that there is a widespread perception that it suffers from certain forms of cultural and unintentional bias. It is striking how much agreement there is about this among groups who otherwise disagree passionately about almost everything else to do with Europe. We think there is substance in their concern. The problem is complex. In essence it seems to be the result of a combination of factors including an institutional mindset, a tendency to polarise and over-simplify issues, a measure of ignorance of the EU on the part of some journalists and a failure to report issues which ought to be reported, perhaps out of a belief that they are not sufficiently entertaining. Whatever the cause in particular cases, the effect is the same for the outside world and feels like bias. Our report explains this in more detail, and makes suggestions about how it might be tackled. We think the Governors of the BBC have a special responsibility for ensuring that the problem is tackled effectively. It will require leadership and engagement by senior managers.
3. Third, we have been impressed by the key role of programme editors in determining the BBC's coverage of EU matters, its tone, style and content. Programme editors have a uniquely powerful role in the BBC's editorial structure. Their independence must be respected. But if change is to happen, it will be the individual editors who deliver it. The BBC at the top level must find a way to ensure that editors buy into the need for change, and that there are adequate mechanisms in place to monitor its progress.

In short, we think that the BBC's coverage of EU news needs to be improved and to be made more demonstrably impartial. We have no doubt about the Corporation's commitment to impartiality but it is not at present winning the battle for confidence in its coverage of EU news. The problem will become increasingly urgent as the Referendum on the EU Constitution approaches. The BBC has many strengths and much talent among its staff and we have no doubt about its ability to rise to this challenge. But it needs a strategy, action and changes, led from the top.

We hope that the Governors will ensure that the BBC is as open as possible about the steps taken in response to our recommendations.

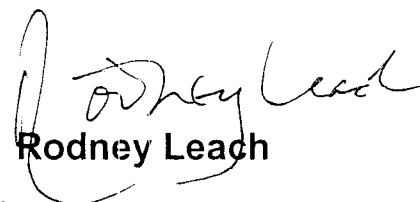
Without the support of John Morrison, Anne Sloman and Helen Nice this report would not have been possible. We are very grateful for all their hard work.



Lord Wilson of Dinton (chair)



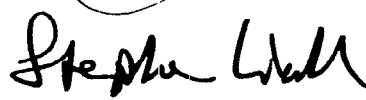
Lucy Armstrong



Rodney Leach



Nigel Smith



Sir Stephen Wall

2. Independent Panel Report

We were asked whether the BBC is systematically europhile. If systematic means deliberate, conscious bias with a directive from the top, an internal system or a conspiracy, we have not found a systematic bias. But we do think there is a serious problem. Although the BBC wishes to be impartial in its news coverage of the EU it is not succeeding. Whatever the intention, nobody thinks the outcome is impartial. There is strong disagreement about the net balance but all parties show remarkable unity in identifying the elements of the problem. Sometimes being attacked from all sides is a sign that an organisation is getting it right. That is not so here. It is a sign that the BBC is getting it wrong, and our main conclusion is that urgent action is required to put this right.

The problem can be summarised under a number of headings which we analyse below:

- i. Institutional mindset
- ii. Over simplified polarisation of the issues and stereotyping
- iii. Westminster prism
- iv. Ignorance
- v. Omission

In the course of our discussions we also came to some conclusions about strategic weaknesses in the BBC's approach to the EU and particular concerns were raised about the forthcoming Referendum. As requested in the terms of reference we also looked at the issue of accessibility. These too are all dealt with below.

- i. Institutional mindset

1. An institutional mindset is not the same as deliberate bias. There is a genuine wish to be seen as impartial among presenters and programme makers, and some programmes succeed in this better than others. Giving the audience the information it needs to make up its own mind is a proper and important role for the BBC and one which it must carry out. We feel that impartiality requires even-handed treatment of the broad spectrum of views held by the British electorate. The BBC should be "the voices" not "the voice" of Britain.
2. In practice many groups feel that the voices of Britain are not being heard. The partiality seems to flow both ways at different times and with different intensities. It is not consistent. For example, sometimes we have found a reluctance to question pro-EU assumptions that one panel member felt are endemic in the BBC and protected by its intellectual culture. It is not part of our brief to enquire into the reasons for this, though some witnesses variously volunteered testimony of a homogeneous professional recruitment base, single employer careers and distaste for conservative ideas. On the other hand, the BBC's coverage of enlargement focused too much on fears of mass migration.

3. The BBC must not slip into construing its task as either one of counterbalancing “ignorant anti-European” prejudice stimulated by the eurosceptic section of the press, or as taking its agenda from that press.
4. Senior managers appear insufficiently self-critical about standards of impartiality. They seem to take it as a given, with little serious thought as to how it applies in practice. This attitude appears to have filtered through to producers, reporters and presenters in the front line. There is no evidence of any systematic monitoring to ensure that all shades of significant opinion are fairly represented and there is a resistance to accepting external evidence. Leaving decisions to individual programme editors means that if there is bias in the coverage overall, no-one in the BBC would know about it.
5. Nor would BBC managers be in a position to accept or reject external allegations of bias and act accordingly. For example the written evidence from the Conservative Party says: “Conservative MEPs are under-represented. Packages from Brussels predominantly contain Labour and Liberal Democrat MEPs but no Conservative. Given that the Conservatives are the largest party within the European Parliament, this cannot be justified.” Without a reliable monitoring system the BBC has no way of knowing whether such allegations are justified.
6. In the absence of such a system, the BBC finds it hard to defend itself against charges of bias. For instance we struggled to gain comprehensive information about complaints received, upheld or rejected. Such evidence as there was overwhelmingly found in favour of complaints from eurocritics. That evidence was also supported by admittedly imperfect evidence from external monitoring, although in the absence of any other sources that is all that was available to us.

One important conclusion is that the BBC needs to put in place effective arrangements for monitoring impartiality. The BBC has a real problem satisfying the world of its impartiality if it has no reliable mechanism for satisfying itself.

ii. Over simplified polarisation of the issues and stereotyping

7. The BBC needs to be much more sophisticated in its presentation of different points of view on Europe. Some favour withdrawal and others favour closer integration but there is a significant body of opinion which favours continued membership of the EU but is critical of further integration. Across the whole spectrum many are critical of individual policies. The BBC needs to reflect this diversity of viewpoint and not leap to the assumption that people are either wholly in favour of, or wholly against, everything in the EU. It is the role of the BBC to test the implications of every shade of opinion. We believe that adversarial interviewing – based on black and white assumptions – usually misses the nuances.
8. Stereotyping leads to bias. A particular example was from a former BBC and Times journalist who was opposed to Britain joining the Euro on economic grounds and who had been asked to do an “opinion” film for The Politics Show. The script drafted for her by the programme said: “there’s just something about being British that we don’t want to lose – our great British

traditions – the pub, the great British breakfast....that’s why I’ll never vote for the Euro.”

9. Stereotyping can also take the form of a mismatch of interviewees, ill-chosen vox pops and the tenor of questioning.
10. Many witnesses told us that the choice of interviewees is either quirky and idiosyncratic, or at the extremes of the argument. This leads to bias when advocates of one side or the other feel their case is not put forward by those who fairly represent their views. It is unhelpful to have “the same old faces” on every programme. The BBC should also seek out non-parliamentary voices. Great care should be taken when describing people as experts, implying impartiality. Their viewpoint doesn’t negate the value of their expertise but the audience needs to know where they’re coming from.
11. The drive for accessibility must take account of the dangers of over-simplification. Many witnesses wished the BBC to be more precise in describing the principal institutions of the EU and its political and business process. For example the BBC should not characterise every EU institution as “Brussels”. This term contributes to a misleading impression in the public’s mind that the UK is not part of the decision making process within EU institutions and makes explanation of the institutions more difficult.
12. Examples of over-simplification given to us were:
 - a. The development of a European defence capability being treated simply as a scheme for a “European Army”.
 - b. Failure to explain that on some issues, such as WTO trade negotiations, the EU alone has the power to negotiate on behalf of the Community.
 - c. Treating France and Germany as shorthand for the rest of the EU and failing to recognise the increased diversity of opinion following enlargement.

iii. Westminster prism

13. The dominance of Westminster politics, both in the structure of BBC News and in the allocation of air-time, leads to distorted reporting of the EU. This is a general problem, but will be of particular significance in the Referendum period, which we deal with at more length below.
14. Too often EU events are reported through the prism of party politics. This can lead to the real story being neglected. For example, the Rome IGC in 2003 was reported largely in terms of the British “red lines” rather than the far more important Spanish/Polish revolt on voting numbers in the Council. This made the breakdown of the IGC seem to come out of the blue. Similarly the consequences of EU directives are sometimes wrongly attributed to domestic policies and vice versa thereby misleading the public about where responsibility lies.
15. The narrow focus of the BBC’s political reporting on MPs and the British Government causes other distortions. For example:
 - a. It has failed to reflect a significant minority opinion that the UK should withdraw from the EU because this does not figure in the policies of the Westminster parties. UKIP in their written evidence say that the

main news programmes are dominated by Westminster based correspondents who rarely meet withdrawalist politicians. The situation has been addressed since UKIP's success in the European elections.

- b. It allows a "them and us" view of Europe too much unchallenged air time leaving the BBC poorly placed to explain "variable geometry" (i.e. that not all countries participate in all policies) or to handle the shades of eurocritical opinion.
- c. It leads the BBC to use MPs to discuss European issues when MEPs might be more appropriate.
- d. By allowing the debate about the Constitution and the Euro to be viewed as an extension of domestic party politics it understates the cross-party and non-party divide on these issues.

iv. Ignorance

16. Journalists are unlikely to be able to explain the issues clearly unless they understand them themselves. There is much evidence that the public do not get the clear and accurate explanations they need because there is a lack of knowledge of the EU at every stage of the process from the selection of an item to the conduct of the interview. Presenters often appear to be ill-briefed and insufficiently armed with the facts necessary to challenge assertions made by interviewees in live interviews, reflecting not just pressure on them but a lack of understanding by programme researchers and producers. For example, Gordon Brown was interviewed on Today about the Referendum on 8 Dec 2004 and made two contentious points, ("the idea that we should detach ourselves from Europe....is not the best way forward for the British economy" and "3 million jobs depend on Europe") which were not challenged. Similarly Liam Fox, when interviewed on Today on 23 November 2004, was not challenged when he said "We think that as the Belgian Prime Minister said, it would become the capstone of a federal state."
17. The difference between the adversarial nature of British politics and the consensual nature of European politics is rarely explained or explored.
18. There is also evidence of a misunderstanding of the political process in the EU. In written evidence the Labour Party stated that: "too often it seems that you report stories about the EU in terms of events in a foreign country and present the idea that the process is one of 'Brussels v the UK'. In reality the decision making process of the EU is overwhelmingly characterised by negotiation rather than confrontation, and very few decisions are taken without the UK's support."
19. There is a disparity of quality and quantity of EU coverage between the World Service and domestic programmes. The Liberal Democrats noted in their written evidence: "If the BBC can get it right for the world, why not for Britain?" In particular, the World Service is better at seeking out non-UK voices to speak on EU issues and seems to be more prepared to look at practical examples of where the EU impacts on daily life, for example Europe Today on Turkey (6 October 2004) and on the EU Constitution (17/18 June 2004).
20. We are sure BBC News has the resources and people to do the job well, but we are concerned that they are not deployed effectively. There appears to be

little use made of external expertise and opinion in briefing and training production staff. Witnesses from external organisations complained of a lack of curiosity shown by BBC journalists who contact them compared with print journalists. Tapping into internal resources (such as specialist correspondents and BBC Analysis and Research) and external resources (such as think tanks and extra parliamentary campaigners) could be used more creatively and fully to establish facts, explore ideas and to get the ammunition to challenge received wisdom.

21. We were struck by the number of witnesses who complained that they had been rung up by inadequately briefed junior BBC researchers with ill-judged preconceptions which gave an impression of bias.

v. Omission

22. All external witnesses pointed out that the BBC News agenda understates the importance and relevance of the EU in the political and daily life of the UK.
23. We of course understand that the BBC has to attract, engage and retain the audience, but this must not lead it to distort or omit challenging topics. A stated aspiration of BBC journalism is to “make the important interesting” but there is a danger that instead they make the interesting important. In all the coverage of the Constitution that we watched and listened to there was little, if any, explanation of what the Constitution contained. The role of editors is very important in this context.
24. The competitive nature of getting a story on air perpetuates the tendency to stick with tried and tested formulae, for example making sure an EU story is put across with a UK angle.
25. We note that across the spectrum of opinion there is widespread criticism of the narrow nature of the coverage and the lack of reporting of issues which have a considerable domestic impact, for example the Working Time or Chemicals Directives. Further examples quoted in UKIP’s evidence are water and air pollution, waste disposal, health and safety and regional policy. The evidence from the Lib Dem European Parliamentary Party notes that “EU affairs do not reflect the pace, schedule or salience of British news stories. We have no debate on fox hunting here, or on casinos. But we do debate and pass laws that impact directly upon British domestic life at national, regional and local level. A large part of the Westminster agenda already flows from UK membership of the European Union. This trend will be accentuated under the constitution. If BBC coverage fails to reflect this phenomenon, it will only serve to reinforce a general British ignorance about the importance of the European dimension to national life.” Similarly the Conservatives urge the BBC to “focus on the issues rather than the process.”
26. All EU correspondents know their stories are considered “opaque and for the foreign page” by their editors, and the evidence suggests the BBC is no exception. This means that too often the first the audience hears of an EU issue is the day a decision is made, without any prior context. This might suggest reluctance on the part of programme editors to run pieces or a failure to make proper use of the Brussels bureau.

vi. Accessibility

27. Making coverage of the EU accessible presents an enormous creative challenge for journalists. We found that some services (Radio 5Live, World Service and longer programmes) are more successful than others at explaining issues and finding ways to bring them alive. Too often coverage of EU issues fails to connect with people's everyday experiences or the impact of EU measures and the focus is on politics and personalities rather than policy.
28. The audience focus group research indicates large sections of the public have very little understanding of the workings of the EU and how it affects their lives: "This group hold the BBC in high regard, and trust it. However, they do not find the EU coverage accessible. This is exacerbated by the media assuming the audience has a better understanding of the issues...and the language used, than it actually has." This represents a failure by the BBC to fulfil its mission to inform and educate. It is not patronising for interviewees to acknowledge the low level of understanding of EU matters in the UK. (Lucy Powell, Britain in Europe on Today 21 April 2004 and Neil Kinnock on Today 19 June 2004). Opportunities to include lines of explanation and information into pieces are often lost.
29. The BBC successfully engages audiences on complex US and Middle Eastern political issues. If it can do it in these areas – if for instance it can explain the concept of the hanging chad or the voting system in Ohio to the British electorate - we believe it can do the same for the EU.

vii. Strategy

30. Senior managers appear to have no well thought out strategy for covering the EU across the BBC's wide range of output aimed at different audiences. Our worry is that senior BBC management mainly focuses on EU coverage as a response to complaints. BBC witnesses recognise that the Referendum poses big issues for them and that they need to address them.
31. BBC witnesses gave the impression that the mindset and editorial thrust of programmes was immutable. It is not clear to us why this should be the case. This attitude also seemed to apply to the relationship between editors and correspondents.
32. Senior managers appear wedded to existing formats of programming and interviewing styles. The success of the innovative Radio 5Live seemed to come as a surprise to senior managers rather than a deliberate attempt to reach a new audience or try new methods of communication for a 21st century audience.

viii. The Referendum

33. Coverage of the Referendum is not strictly part of our terms of reference but it is something which we found ourselves repeatedly addressing. We recognise that party politicians will have a prominent role to play. It must be for the BBC to draw up its own guidelines but it is clear that there are important strategic issues here. These include:

- a. Ensuring programme makers understand that covering a Referendum is different from covering a general election. Direct democracy is different from representative democracy.
- b. Finding the correct balance between the campaign as presented by the political parties and the campaign as presented by the “yes” and “no” campaigns.
- c. Ensuring that the BBC’s presenters are equipped to challenge assertions made by interviewees so that the electorate can make an informed judgement on the question on the ballot paper.
- d. Discussing the role of campaign groups in choosing their own spokespeople - as opposed to the right of the BBC to choose who appears on its own programmes.

3. Recommendations

1. The thrust of our recommendations is that there needs to be better and more impartial coverage of the EU to explain major issues to a wider audience.
2. Members of the BBC Journalism Board need to give priority to producing a strategy and plan of action to address the issues raised in this report. This includes the dangers of stereotyping, the over-simplification of issues, and preparations for the Referendum.
3. Coverage should reflect the importance of the policy issues under discussion in the EU, should focus on substance and outcomes for the lives of the audience and should not always be seen through the focus of Westminster politics or the pro and anti debate. Decisions on coverage must be based on BBC News' own assessment of their importance and how they fit into the BBC ethos as a public service broadcaster.
4. If the relationship of EU politics to domestic issues is to be better addressed the panel recommend consideration should be given to:
 - a. Specifying that the key role of the Brussels bureau is to cover EU affairs rather than general news in Europe.
 - b. Appointing an EU editor of equivalent status to the BBC's political and economic editors.
 - c. Examining the potential benefits of moving management of EU coverage from world news to domestic news.
5. There should be more advance journalistic planning on issues known to be coming up, notably the Referendum, but also for example the UK Presidency of the EU in 2005. Resources should be made available accordingly.
6. The problem of ignorance among BBC journalists on the EU issue must be addressed as a matter of urgency. The BBC should devote more resources to training programme makers and researchers so that they better understand the EU.
7. The BBC needs to take more care in the selection of interviewees. The test of successful coverage should be whether the audience is better informed about an issue, not just whether there has been a lively confrontation between interviewees or presenter and interviewee.
8. In particular there needs to be a more creative approach to representing the spread of public opinion particularly on issues where the full range of arguments is not represented in Parliament. This may require a different approach to non-political contributors.
9. Implementation of many of our recommendations will require a robust system of monitoring to ensure that over time the full range of opinions are heard and challenged.
10. Audiences should be directed on air more often to other sources of background information – for example BBC News online.

11. There should be a creative review of the output of the programmes we consider to be more successful in covering EU issues (Radio 5Live, World Service and longer programmes) is carried out to establish best practice for other BBC journalists to follow.
12. Early thought should be given to the preparation of Referendum guidelines following discussions with all interested parties. The BBC should make public its plans for educating and informing its staff about referendum issues in the run up to the vote. These plans should include opportunities for campaigners to talk directly to key BBC staff.