

Broadcasters' Liaison Group (BLG) meeting, 8 February 2005
Note of conclusions and action points

Present: Paul Chinnery (Five), Emma Jones (S4C), David Jordan (BBC) (chair), Peter Lowe (BSkyB), Ian McBride (ITV), Lisa McLaughlin (BBC Scotland), Prash Naik (Channel 4), Nick Powell (HTV), Ian Pratt (BBC Wales), Rob Shepherd (BBC), Martin Stott (Five), Derrick Thomson (SMG).

In attendance: Jane Harris (Electoral Commission), Tabby Karamat (BBC), Jaron Lewis (BBC).

Apologies: Eleanor Aitken (BBC Scotland), Andrew Colman (BBC Northern Ireland), Nerys Hopkins (S4C), Rob Morrison (UTV), Huw Roberts (BBC Wales), Nick Toon (Channel 4).

Venue: 28 Portland Place, London

1. MEETINGS WITH POLITICAL PARTIES

On 11 January 2005 the group had held separate meetings with representatives of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democratic parties. The group now met representatives of twelve further political parties from Great Britain who were expected to stand sufficient candidates at elections in 2005 to qualify for a PEB.

The main purpose of the meeting was to canvas the views of the parties about how PEB slots are allocated during the 2005 elections, and in particular any forthcoming General Election.

Meetings were held with the parties in the following order:

1. Scottish National Party (Peter Murrell)
2. UKIP (Mike Nattrass and Nigel Farage)
3. English Democrats (Robin Tilbrook & 2 others)
4. BNP (Richard Barnbrook, Roderick Gordon and Eddie Butler)
5. English and Welsh Greens (Matt Wooton)
6. Scottish Greens (George Baxter)
7. Scottish Socialist Party (Eddie Truman)
8. Respect (Rob Hoveman)
9. Socialist Labour Party (John Hayball)
10. Operation Christian Voice/Christian Democrat Party (Rev Hargreaves)
11. Veritas (Martin Cole and David Soutter)

Plaid Cymru had been invited but did not attend.

At the start of each meeting, the Chair explained that the BLG was an informal group that met to assist the broadcasters in considering the issues arising out of PEBs. It was explained that the group does not itself take decisions: these are still taken by the individual broadcasters. The Chair explained that the purpose of the meeting was to hear views from the parties about the PEB system generally and to discuss views on how they should be allocated in the forthcoming General Election.

Most discussions with the parties related to the allocation of PEBs, with each party explaining their position and seeking further information about how many PEBs they would be likely to receive based on past criteria. Many parties also explained why they believed they should be entitled to more PEB slots than their rivals. The other main points of significance that were raised included:

- (a) **Allocation.** The broadcasters had not yet reached decisions on allocation, although the commercial channels were obliged to adopt a “one sixth” criteria. It was the case with all channels that if a party stood in one sixth of seats in England, Scotland and Wales (namely 88, 10 and 6 seats respectively) it would get a GB-wide broadcast. The BBC and ITV would also offer a PEB in a given Nation to any party standing in one sixth of the seats in that Nation. Members of the group were considering whether to vary these criteria to allow a GB-wide PEB if a party stood in one sixth of GB seats (ie 104 seats), without necessarily standing one sixth of seats in each Nation. This topic was discussed with some of the parties.

The group explained that its members generally looked at past and present electoral support when deciding on the number of broadcasts to allocate to each party. For the forthcoming general election, this would include a consideration of electoral performance at the last General Election, both in terms of share and MPs elected, the number of seats in which the party is standing for election, electoral performance at elections since the last General Election, again both in terms of share and politicians elected and levels of current electoral support, including recent election results, opinion polls and any other credible evidence which helps to measure levels of current support. Other factors can also be considered if appropriate, providing they are indicative of levels of past and present electoral support and are objective in nature.

- (b) **Duration.** The parties themselves decide how long their PEBs will be, from a choice of 2’40”, 3’40” or 4’40”. One party asked if the introductions to PEBs could be shorter. The group explained that this was difficult as it was necessary to distinguish PEBs from normal programming.

- (c) **Scheduling.** The normal broadcast time on BBC One is 18.55 with a standby of 22.30. On ITV PEBs are broadcast at 18.35. Scheduling decisions are taken broadly on the same basis as allocation. If parties qualify for just one transmission, the broadcasters try and show their PEBs relatively near to the election.
- (d) **Timing/Delivery to Broadcasters.** The group reiterated that parties needed to get PEBs to them 24 hours in advance. If a broadcaster delivers them late, it does so at its own risk and a new slot will not be allocated.
- (e) **Content.** It is for the parties to determine the content of their broadcast, providing they comply with broadcast codes, the law and the technical and other guidelines that have been produced. If a party has more than one PEB allocated, it can use the same broadcast for each if it so wishes. Parties are also allowed to submit different broadcasts to each broadcaster – it is a matter for them. Parliamentary candidates can be shown in broadcasts, providing they are not labelled as such and it is not apparent that they are representing an identifiable constituency. One party asked if the BBC would provide archive footage without charge. They were informed that this was not possible and they would have to purchase material in the usual way and subject to usual sale restrictions.
- (f) **Council Elections.** Where local elections are held at the same time as the general election, the allocation of PEBs is usually made by reference only to the general election.
- (g) **Alliances.** Two parties raised the possibility of entering into alliances with other political parties in order to meet the relevant threshold criteria. It was explained that each broadcaster would consider any alliances on a case by case basis. The parties would need to be able to demonstrate that they were a genuine alliance with common purpose, for example with evidence of an agreement between the parties and/or the inclusion of reference to the alliance in the registered party name and/or evidence of co-operation on electoral campaigning. If satisfied, broadcasters may then allocate the alliance itself a broadcast. Each party in the alliance would not get a separate broadcast.
- (h) **Appeal.** One party asked what it could do if it did not like a broadcaster's decision on the allocation of PEBs. The group reminded them that each broadcaster will take their own decisions. If a party is unhappy with the decision of a commercial broadcaster, they should contact Ofcom. If they are unhappy with a decision of the BBC, they should contact the Governors.

2. LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

At its previous meeting, the group had heard representations from the Liberal Democrats who sought parity with the Conservative and Labour parties with the allocation of five PEBs in England. The Liberal Democrats already had parity in Wales and Scotland, where the four main parties each received four broadcasts. The main criteria applied by each broadcaster when determining the number of PEBs to allocate are set out in paragraph 1(a) above: each broadcaster will look objectively at past and present performance.

The group considered detailed statistics of previous electoral performance for all the main parties and opinion poll data. It was noted by some members of the group that the statistics might suggest a 5:5:3 allocation, ie less favourable to the Liberal Democrats than now. On balance, all members present with responsibility for UK-wide and English PEB broadcasts were of the view that the evidence did not justify a change in the allocation for the forthcoming General Election.

3. BROADCAST INTOS/OUTROS

A storyboard was considered. The group felt that it was important to get any change right and not to just amend the existing material for the sake of it. It was agreed that further work was required. Channel Controllers and schedulers need to be consulted and financial and management approval given.