

Broadcasters' Liaison Group (BLG) Meeting 12 January 2009
Note of conclusions and action points

Present: Ric Bailey (BBC), Dominic Harrison (Channel 4) , Tim Hartley (S4C), Chris Loweth (Five), Peter Lowe (BSkyB), Rosalind McInnes (BBC Scotland), Steve Perkins (Ofcom), Nick Powell (ITV Wales), Ian Pratt (BBC Wales), Stephen Rooney (Electoral Commission), Rob Shepherd (BBC), Martin Stott (Five), Chris Wissun (ITV),

In attendance: Nadia Banno (BBC), Sarah Jones (BBC)

Apologies:

Venue: 28 Portland Place, London

1 NOTES OF LAST MEETING

These were circulated at the meeting and were approved for publication. They do not purport to be a full record but merely a note of the conclusions and action points. It was further noted that it may be appropriate to stop using DCMS Review of Party Political Broadcasting as a point of reference, as it is now rather out of date. The Electoral Commission is considering what to do about the future of political broadcasting and the implications for party election broadcasts (PEBs) and political advertising.

2 MATTERS ARISING

(a) Christian Peoples Alliance judgment. The 2008 judgment of the Administrative Court in *The Queen on the application of Craig (Christian Peoples Alliance) v BBC* was briefly discussed. The case raised issues relating to the content of a PEB and the broadcaster's concerns about it including potentially defamatory material. It was noted that parties should be asked to nominate a person for broadcasters to speak to regarding PEBs and that the broadcasters should emphasise the importance of complying with the times of delivery in order to be able to resolve any difficulties. Finally, it was agreed that it was worth emphasising that late delivery may incur editing costs which the parties would be expected to cover.

- (b) 2008 Mayoral Elections. It was noted that some problems had arisen by the requirement that parties stand candidates in all the seats (including the top-up seats). It was agreed it would be useful to review the electoral criteria where top-up lists apply in proportional representation elections.
- (c) Telephony Elections. It was agreed that premium rate lines were not allowed in elections. The question is which lines could be used. It was agreed that it was inappropriate for revenue raising lines to be used and this needed to be emphasised to the political parties.
- (d) Criteria for the forthcoming European Elections. The purpose of this meeting was to canvas the views of the parties about the allocation of PEBs for the 2009 European Elections. The criteria for the 2004 European elections were discussed. These had been that to qualify for an election broadcast, parties needed to stand a full list in each nation. Additional broadcasts were allocated according to past and previous electoral support.
- (e) General Election Criteria. The views of the parties about the allocation of PEBs for the 2010 General Election would also be invited at the meeting, if the parties had had an opportunity to turn their minds to them. Previous General Election criteria were distributed.
- (f) Party Political Broadcasts: Badging. It was agreed that it was better to refer to party political broadcasts as just that rather than referring to “conference broadcasts” which suggests that they should only be used at conference time.
- (g) Northern Ireland. It was agreed that there would be separate meetings of the BLG in Northern Ireland.

3 MEETINGS WITH POLITICAL PARTIES

The BLG had invited representatives from the political parties in England, Scotland and Wales which were likely to qualify for a PEB during the 2009 European Elections.

The main purpose of the meeting was to canvas the views of the parties about how PEB slots should be allocated for the local and European Elections, as well as the 2010 General Election.

Meetings were arranged with the parties as follows:

- (i) Labour Party (Jo Green)
- (ii) Liberal Democrats (Lord Rennard MBE)
- (iii) SNP (Anne Harvey)
- (iv) UKIP (Clive Page)
- (v) Conservative Party (Michael Salter)
- (vi) Green Party (Tracy Dighton-Brown)
- (vii) English Democrats (Robin Tilbrook)
- (viii) SSCUP (David Thomson)
- (ix) Respect (Rob Hoveman)
- (x) Christian Party (Don Botham)
- (xi) Scottish Green Party
- (xii) BNP (Tony Avery)
- (xiii) Plaid Cymru

The following parties had been invited but did not attend: Christian Peoples Alliance and Left Alternative Party.

At the start of each meeting, the Chair explained that:

- The BLG's function is to act as a forum for discussion and co-operation, not to take executive decisions. Each broadcaster makes its own decision.
- The purpose of the meeting was to get the views of the different parties on the allocation of PEBs, both in the local and European elections but also in the forthcoming general elections.
- It was important that the PEBs be delivered on time, failing which editing costs could be incurred.

Similar issues were raised by each of the parties.

- (a) Allocation. Two of the main parties expressed satisfaction with the number of PEBs they were allocated in the previous European Elections. Some of the parties requested an increase in their allocation of PEBs based on recent electoral performance. A smaller party expressed its concern that the threshold criteria of standing a full list in each nation might be too high for them to qualify for a PEB for the European Elections. In respect of the General Election, one of the main parties indicated they were happy with the PEB allocation for the previous General Election whilst other parties asked for an increase, based on electoral performance, so that they had parity with the main parties.
- (b) Duration. One party asked that broadcasters consider the possibility of having broadcasts of one and a half minutes or even shorter.
- (c) Scheduling. One party requested that scheduling be improved as they were concerned that people would have only one opportunity to see their broadcasts. They asked whether it would be possible to increase the frequency of the PEBs in exchange for a reduction in their duration.
- (d) Timing/Delivery to Broadcasters. Parties were reminded by the BLG to deliver their PEBs on time, and preferably as early as possible to deal with any difficulties that may arise. The BLG website contains production guidelines which provide details about permissible content, format, duration and delivery.
- (e) Radio. One party asked what BBC Radio 1 and commercial radio were doing in relation to PEBs.
- (f) Digital Television Channels. One party asked whether Sky would show PEBs, to which Sky responded that no final decision had been taken, but it was unlikely for the local elections and they would let parties know in due course about the General Election.

The broadcasters present had a discussion about the issues raised and agreed to consult their decision making bodies in order to agree provisional criteria for PEB allocation in the European Elections.