

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: GOVERNMENT'S ROLE IN UPHOLDING THE IMPARTIALITY OF BBC NEWS COVERAGE

Westminster Hall, Sir Michael Ellis MP

Tuesday 27 February 2024

- The Countryside Alliance is gravely concerned about the BBC's poor record of impartiality in its news and current affairs programming in relation to its coverage of rural issues.
- A 2014 BBC review of its rural programming found that the BBC's coverage of rural affairs suffered from a '*metropolitan bias*' and was thought to be '*squeamish*' and '*simplistic*'.
- As recently as 2022, however, a Countryside Alliance survey found that almost 95% of respondents still did not believe the BBC is covering rural issues fairly and impartially. Over 75% of respondents did not believe that the TV Licence represents good value for money.
- The BBC response to controversial behaviour by presenters on social media blatantly contradicts the statement made to BBC staff by Director General Tim Davie upon his appointment that the BBC needed to regain its reputation for impartiality and therefore, "*If you want to be an opinionated columnist or a partisan campaigner on social media then that is a valid choice, but you should not be working at the BBC*".
- The government rightly does not exercise direct editorial control over the BBC. It is, however, responsible for agreeing the BBC's Royal Charter and for permitting it to continue to levy a TV Licence fee to fund its operations.
- If the BBC cannot serve its rural audiences to their broad satisfaction in its coverage of rural issues, the government should look to use these levers to restore fairness for what risks becoming a marginalised audience.

Background

- In June 2014 the BBC published a report it had commissioned from Heather Hancock, the former chair of its rural affairs committee, into its coverage of rural affairs in the UK.¹
- The Countryside Alliance had contributed to the review. In our response, we argued that the BBC's coverage is like an audio-visual version of the National Trust magazine, viewing the countryside as a giant leisure park, to be visited and enjoyed before returning to "normal" places.²

¹ BBC, [BBC Trust Impartiality Review: BBC coverage of Rural Areas in the UK](#), 06.14

² Countryside Alliance, [Alliance response to BBC Trust Review into rural programming](#)

- Our comments included: *“Coverage centres on things to do and see, and is predominately presented by people who are urban in tone and outlook and country people, when they are featured, are often presented as curiosities... Rural people have the same concerns as anyone else about crime, the economy, the NHS etc, but we are also different in some ways from our urban peers in terms of the issues we face and how we view them.”*
- The Review heard opinions from other respondents that coverage of the countryside was *“squeamish”* and *“simplistic”*, and that some audiences felt it has a *“metropolitan bias”* in its approach to reporting on rural issues.
- It also reported that *“the BBC relied disproportionately on a small number of external bodies for input and comment,”* and had a tendency to focus on conflicts or protests, turning all rural topics into a binary argument rather than helping listeners understand the subject at hand.
- A BBC spokesperson responded by saying: *“Whilst the report finds overall we do a good job reflecting and reporting rural affairs there are areas where we can do better and we have committed to a range of steps to help improve the coverage further.”*³

Countryside Alliance research

- In summer 2022 it began to be reported that the BBC intended to commission a new impartiality report into programmes such as Countryfile. We therefore took the opportunity to poll our members and supporters on their views of the BBC.⁴
- The headline finding was that in response to the question *“Do you think the BBC covers rural issues fairly and impartially?”*, 94.65% of over 3,000 respondents answered, *“No”*.
- In response to subsequent questions, 76.71% expressed the view that the TV Licence fee does not represent good value for money, and 67.87% thought it should be scrapped.
- We asked whether respondents felt a range of specific programmes represented rural issues adequately. No programme received a majority positive response. The most positive was Farming Today, which 42.89% of respondents agreed was representing the issues adequately. Other programmes had an overwhelmingly negative reception. The following percentages of respondents said that the corresponding programmes **do not** represent rural issues adequately:
 - Autumnwatch: 92.25%
 - BBC National News: 92.16%
 - Springwatch: 91.90%
 - Countryfile: 89.70%
 - BBC regional news: 80.62%
 - The Archers: 78.79%
- We also sought views on which rural issues respondents would like to see more of on the BBC. Endorsements were received from the following percentages of respondents for the associated topics:
 - Farming: 79.6%
 - Hunting, shooting and fishing: 78.27%

³ BBC, [BBC rural coverage has 'metropolitan bias'](#), 26.06.14

⁴ Countryside Alliance, [New research shows 94% of respondents reject the claim that the BBC covers rural issues fairly](#), 08.08.22

- Conservation and land management: 61.62%
- Rural communities: 60.70%
- Rural businesses: 54.70%
- Traditional rural crafts: 49.56%

Partiality by presenters and BBC inaction

- Criticisms of BBC presenters' behaviour on social media, and the resulting negative perceptions created of BBC impartiality over their sharing of controversial opinions, came to a head a year ago when Gary Lineker was suspended and subsequently reinstated over controversial remarks concerning the Government's immigration policy. The Countryside Alliance had, however, earlier lodged a series of complaints over the conduct of its wildlife presenter, Chris Packham.
- When badger cull trials began in 2013 to tackle bovine tuberculosis, Packham, describing himself in his Twitter biography as a "*naturalist and BBC broadcaster*", tweeted that the farmers and wildlife managers who were about to carry out culls were "*brutalist thugs, liars and frauds [who] will destroy our wildlife and dishonour our nations reputation*".
- Following an Alliance complaint as to the intemperate nature of the remarks and our concern over their impact on the BBC's reputation for impartiality, the BBC response claimed, "*Although [Chris Packham's Twitter account] identifies Chris as a BBC presenter, this does not imply BBC endorsement of the views aired on the account.*"
- Subsequently in 2015, Packham wrote an article for BBC Wildlife Magazine – a BBC platform – in which he described people who shoot and hunt as "*the nasty brigade*". The Alliance again complained on grounds of partiality and violation of the BBC Editorial Guidelines.
- The BBC Trust eventually ruled that Packham was not required to abide by the Guidelines because he was a freelance presenter not an employee, a recurrent presenter, not a regular one (despite working for the BBC for 119 days in the previous year), and because it regarded debates about rural policy as academic, not political.⁵

Countryside Alliance position

- The Countryside Alliance is gravely concerned about the BBC's poor record of impartiality in its news and current affairs programming in relation to its coverage of rural issues.
- Countryside Alliance research indicates that rural viewers do not trust the BBC to act or report impartially about issues that affect their communities, nor on fundamental aspects of the rural way of life.
- The Lineker and Packham cases have resulted in the BBC taking the illogical position that freelance BBC presenters are effectively free to express whatever opinions they like in whichever form they prefer, whatever the impact on the reputation of the BBC.

⁵ Countryside Alliance, [Tim Bonner: Packham, Lineker and a crisis of the BBC's own making](#), 16.03.23

- This blatantly contradicts the statement made to BBC staff by Director General Tim Davie upon his appointment that the BBC needed to regain its reputation for impartiality and therefore, *“If you want to be an opinionated columnist or a partisan campaigner on social media then that is a valid choice, but you should not be working at the BBC”*.
- The government rightly does not exercise direct editorial control over the BBC. It is, however, responsible for agreeing the BBC’s Royal Charter and for permitting it to continue to levy a TV Licence fee to fund its operations.
- If the BBC cannot serve its rural audiences to their broad satisfaction in its coverage of rural issues, the government should look to use these levers to restore fairness for what risks becoming a marginalised audience.

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