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AN OUTBREAK OF NARCOLEPSY?

WHY THE BBC MUST IMPROVE
ITS COVERAGE OF THE EU

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SUMMARY

- The European Union is playing an increasingly important role in our national political life. The Cabinet Office reports that almost half of all major UK legislation now originates in Brussels.
- This is not reflected in the BBC's coverage of the European Union. For example, The proportion of total airtime on the main BBC television news programmes covering the 1999 EU elections was just 2.6%.
- This low level of coverage continued in the years since 1999. For example, between September 2002 and June 2003 (a period of significant political development in the EU), under 5% of the output of the Today programme covered the EU. In comparison, Home Affairs took close to 50% of output while World News between 20% and 33% (see Appendix II for details).
- The level of EU coverage on the BBC was not only low in absolute terms. It was also low relative to the coverage of the EU in the broadsheet press. For example, of the 34 EU stories covered by two or more broadsheet papers in the run-up to the Seville Summit, the Today programme only covered eight.
- New elections to the European Parliament will be held on 10 June 2004. Recent polls suggest that only 18% of the electorate will vote.

- The European Union is undoubtedly a difficult subject for broadcasters. It is complex, evolving and in many respects boring. Yet it is also an important one.

- Improved coverage is essential if the BBC is to fulfil its public service remit to “inform, educate and entertain.” If it were able to accept that its coverage of the EU could be both more extensive and more stimulating, the BBC might consider implementing some of the following suggestions: the creation of a special EU slot on Today and selected new programmes; the creation of a new position of EU editor (to be modelled on Jeff Randall’s appointment as Business Editor); and submitting itself to independent scrutiny of its EU output. It might also consider a daily EU election slot in the run-up to this year’s elections (based on the ITN example of previous years).

- Finally, it is not the puprose of this report to address the question of whether the BBC shows any sign of bias in its coverage of the EU.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Few issues have divided British society and the political establishment as much as the developing relationship with European Union.

Despite this, the EU has been poorly covered by the BBC. Five years of periodic monitoring by Minotaur – covering 14 separate studies and more than 1,000 programme transcripts – shows that the Corporation devotes a remarkably low volume of airtime to the EU and its affairs.¹

During the European Parliamentary elections of 1999, for example – when it would be expected that coverage of the EU would be relatively high – the proportion of airtime devoted by the main BBC television news bulletins was 2.6%.² Sustained monitoring of BBC Radio 4's Today programme, between September 2002 and June 2003, showed that EU-related affairs averaged less than 5% of programme time, although this was a period of major political development in the EU. The changes included the ratification and enactment of the Nice Treaty, the steps towards enlargement culminating with agreement in late 2002 and the development of a new Constitution.

There is plenty of other evidence of the inadequacy of coverage. BBC2's Newsnight covered the European Parliamentary elections of 1999 through

¹ Appendix 1 details the periods during which the BBC's coverage of the EU was monitored; and Appendix II details the volume of EU coverage.

² *Survey of UK broadcasters' reporting of the 1999 European Elections*, www.globalbritain.org. This and other reports referred to in this paper are by Minotaur Media Tracking and found at this website, unless otherwise stated.

just two programme items.³ The second Irish referendum on the Treaty of Nice was covered by the Today programme without a single interview of a British politician about its implications.⁴ Also on Today, Gisela Stewart's views on her decision to move from being a strong advocate of the EU Constitution to being opposed to it, were the subject of just two minutes of interview time.⁵

This paper presents and examines the limitations of the BBC's coverage. The argument is that reporting was insufficient to cover the development of the EU and Britain's relationship to it properly; did not reflect the volume of news emanating from the EU; and that finally, the BBC's positioning of the EU and its affairs was so low on the current affairs agenda that it has curtailed debate – to the point where this may have been a contributory factor in the low turn-out in European Parliamentary elections.

According to the Cabinet Office, “almost half of all UK laws start off in Europe”

Analysis of the BBC's coverage of the EU also reveals an underlying assumption that listeners would find European politics “dreary”. These factors call into question whether the BBC has fulfilled its public service remit to inform and educate in this area, or to meet its requirements for balance and impartiality. And whether or not the EU is boring, it is undoubtedly important: according to the Cabinet Office website, “almost half of all major UK laws start off in Europe”.⁶

It is for others to judge whether the BBC has displayed any bias in this area of its coverage – whether consciously or by default. Some may view the evidence set out below as reflecting a tendency within the BBC towards what has been described as a liberal/left-wing mindset. Some may see an editorial tendency to skew debate in terms of the “inevitability” of British membership and acceptance of each new development.

Opinions vary on even the simplest of points. In a debate as complex as that about the EU, it is not easy to decide where the centre of balance should be and consequently, whether the BBC is adhering to it.

The central issue here is how to improve the level of the BBC's coverage. With the elections to the European Parliament due to be held on 10 June 2004, this is perhaps more important than ever: a recent MORI poll

³ *Survey of UK broadcasters' reporting of 1999 European Elections.* Newsnight carried a third item on EU matters during the survey period – on food subsidies – but it was not related to the elections.

⁴ *Irish Referendum on the Treaty of Nice.*

⁵ *EU Constitution report.*

⁶ See www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/regulation/Europe/Index.htm

conducted for the UK Office of the European Parliament found that only 18% of the British public say they are certain to vote in the European elections on 10 June later this year. Five years ago, 27% of the electorate had indicated that they were certain to vote. In 1999 the UK turnout was the lowest in the EU, at 24%.

Only 18% of the British public say they are certain to vote in the June elections to the EU Parliament

The Hutton Report into the death of Dr David Kelly uncovered defective editorial processes in BBC News. The senior management at the BBC, including the Director of News, the Director General and the Chairman of the Governors, were said by Lord Hutton to have failed in their duty to investigate properly the Government's complaints.

A similar failure to take criticism seriously enough, to look into shortcomings, or to engage in a truly critical debate about the nature of their EU-related coverage, has been characteristic of the BBC's response to the work of Minotaur.⁷

The EU plays an increasingly significant role in our national life. Will the world's leading public service broadcaster now acknowledge this and devote suitable resources to this subject?

⁷ The response of two Chairmen and one Director General of the BBC to the series of surveys conducted by Minotaur since 1999 has been uniformly dismissive. Copies of the correspondence can be found on the Global Britain website.

As the polls closed on 10 June 1999, Jeremy Paxman described the low turn-out as “an outbreak of narcolepsy”

CHAPTER TWO

FACELESS AND BORING

2.1 THE 1999 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

After the polls closed on 10 June 1999, Jeremy Paxman described the low turn out and the apparent lack of interest in the elections to the European Parliament as “an outbreak of narcolepsy” (sleeping sickness).⁸ His assessment aptly defined the BBC’s general approach towards the European Union.

During the the build-up to the election, there was an extremely low volume of coverage devoted to the campaign itself and to EU issues in general on both the BBC and ITV. Items amounted to only 2.6% of the output of BBC television news bulletins and less than 6% of that of the BBC’s speech and news channel, Radio 4. Furthermore, many of the items fell outside peak hours and slots.⁹

It was remarkable that BBC2’s Newsnight, BBC television’s flagship news and analysis programme, on air for 27 days during the period of monitoring, tackled the elections for the first time only on 27 May. Only two feature items were dedicated to the election before voting took place.¹⁰ The war in Kosovo was dominating news coverage but it could not be used as a catch-all excuse

⁸ Newsnight, 10 June 1999.

⁹ *Survey of UK broadcasters’ reporting of the 1999 European Elections.*

¹⁰ A package by Mark Mardell pegged on the 27 May Euro Socialist Rally profiled the main stance of the parties; and an investigation by Gordon Brewer on 4 June looked at the workings of a common European defence policy. The final item was Jeremy Paxman’s round up after the polls closed.

for the low level of EU-related items, as there was plenty of space for other material. Packages run on the programme during the period included body piercing, the forthcoming eclipse at Land's End, a look at the latest issues on cloning, the drying up of a Russian sea and the AIDS epidemic in Malawi.

Whether Newsnight's ratio of 20 to 1 of coverage of Kosovo to the European Parliament elections struck the right balance seemed at least to be open to debate, especially when Martin Bell, a former senior BBC foreign correspondent, argued that the deployment by the Corporation of 19 reporters in the field had added little of substance while creating competition for editorial space.¹¹

In the five weeks in the run-up to the 1999 European elections, more time was given to sport on Radio 4 News than to the EU elections.

This low volume of coverage typified output across the BBC. Radio 4 News programming, the heart of the BBC's public service remit, is often held up as a bastion of quality and as an exemplar of what the corporation stands for. Although its news output adds up to 5¾ hours per day, only 8 hours over the entire five weeks was given over to the EU and the Elections.¹²

Time constraints may have hampered the originality of coverage. On both radio and television the material carried about the European Elections was uninspired and presenters conveyed boredom and cynicism.¹³ Reports of the major party launches and press conferences were cursory and did little more than pay lip service to the election.

Dedicated listeners to the daily three hours of the Today programme (which carried 50 items over the five weeks with 15 of them in the last three days) were informed that the election was taking place and heard some of the arguments about the euro and the introduction of a new ballot paper. But they heard little debate of the topics which the political parties thought were central to the campaign.

¹¹ Martin Bell, *An Accidental MP*, Viking, 2000.

¹² A significant proportion of this was made up, not of election coverage, but of packages and discussions chronicling the fall of the euro.

¹³ Introducing an item on the European Elections on *The World Tonight*, 21 May 1999, Robin Lustig said: "The European Election Campaign is in full swing now – you may not have noticed but it is. All the main parties have published their manifestos and if past precedent is anything to go by nearly two thirds of us will be so underwhelmed by what they contain that we won't even bother to vote on June 10th."

Except for brief mentions,¹⁴ and unless they had caught Romano Prodi speaking on BBC1's On the Record¹⁵ at the start of the campaign, listeners would not have heard of moves towards greater powers for the European Parliament outlined at the Bonn Summit, and Mr Prodi's remarks on the need for a European government, a common defence policy and a European Army. These were not featured in subsequent news bulletins.

"If past precedent is anything to go by nearly two thirds of us will be so underwhelmed by what they contain that we won't even bother to vote" – Robert Lustig, The World Tonight

Tony Blair spelt out his own vision for a much more integrated Europe in a major speech at Aachen during the campaign¹⁶ – an event, along with William Hague's contrasting and contemporaneous speech, scarcely reported at all.¹⁷

Viewers and listeners would not have known of the efforts by European financial leaders to impose a unitary tax structure; they would not have been aware of the impact of the EU on voters across the other member states; they would not have heard reports from the constituencies, nor examinations of the workings of the Common Agricultural Policy and Common Fisheries Policy, nor the role of the MEP. Not a single candidate was interviewed on national television or radio. They were neither heard nor seen. This was a faceless election.

2.2 THE BBC'S RESPONSE

In response to Minotaur's findings, the BBC argued that the war in Kosovo had dominated the agenda.¹⁸ Yet there were competing news stories with relevance to the European Elections that the BBC chose to all but ignore. For example the speeches of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition revealed discordant visions of the EU. Eddie George's and Mervyn King's assertion to the Treasury Select Committee that entry into

¹⁴ The Westminster Hour, 9 May 1999 and an interview with John Maples MP which focused on Tory splits on Today, 10 May 1999.

¹⁵ Broadcast on BBC 1 On The Record on 9 May 1999. This was a strong story which was followed up by ITN in a package by Jo Andrews on both early and late evening bulletins.

¹⁶ World at One, BBC Radio 4, 13 May, 1999 carried a 2½ minute item with John Sergeant.

¹⁷ BBC Radio 4 Today newspaper reviews at 6.13am and 7.42am on Today, 14 May 1999.

¹⁸ Letter from Sir Christopher Bland, 22 July 1999.

the Euro would be an act of faith (a story broken by PM),¹⁹ was not seized on or developed.²⁰

Ironically, the one story that the listener could not have missed, which attracted a disproportionate amount of the broadcaster's attention, the BBC misjudged. This was the story of the breakaway "Pro-Europe" Conservative Party. In the event and despite their airtime on the BBC, it turned out to be a damp squib. The party won only 1.4% of the vote and did not manage to win one seat (compared to the United Kingdom Independence Party, which won 7.7% of the vote and 3 seats).²¹

Confronted with this evidence Sir Christopher Bland's response was to deny systematic bias. He claimed that:

Counting appearances, or measuring the duration of appearances by use of a stop-watch, has never been a very helpful indicator of the delivery of our charter obligations to fairness and impartiality.²²

But surely measurements of this sort are both a necessary starting point and indeed significant indicators of how the BBC covered these elections?

There was a note of weary triumphalism in Jeremy Paxman's voice when he made the narcolepsy remark in connection with the low turn out minutes after the polls closed. But apathy had been defined as an accepted and unavoidable feature of the elections by the broadcasters from early in the campaign. With the benefit of hindsight, one can try to question how much the broadcasters had contributed, through lack of coverage, to creating a new national record low in election turnouts in Britain.

¹⁹ Broadcast on 27 May 1999.

²⁰ Discussed only in one interview with the financial commentator of *The Independent* on *The World Tonight* 27 May 1999, given 25 seconds of airtime on the *Today* programme next morning in the context of the 6.12am newspaper review and mentioned on BBC Breakfast Time at 6.13am in package on the falling Euro. This was despite prominent coverage of the story across broadsheet and tabloid press.

²¹ The UKIP was granted only one direct interview on BBC Radio 4 (20 May 1999) and this was tainted by a disparaging association with the BNP. John Humphreys' fourth question to Nigel Farage was: "Does it worry you that you have been singled out for praise... by the BNP in their newsletter, *Spearhead*?"

²² Letter from Sir Christopher Bland dated 22 July 1999.

²³ *Newsnight*, 10 June 1999.

CHAPTER THREE

'AN EMBARRASSMENT TO EVERYBODY'²⁴

3.1 COVERAGE FROM 2000 TO 2002

In the run-up to the launch of the Euro in January 2002, debate about the single currency and EU affairs intensified. Calls for a referendum on British entry featured heavily in the press. In May and June 2001 the Conservatives had fought the General Election on a campaign to save the pound. In December 2002, the heads of government met in Copenhagen to ratify enlargement of the EU.

The period was marked by a continuing split between parliamentary and public opinion. While opinion polls consistently suggested that up to 33% of the population of the UK supported the possibility of Britain's withdrawal from the EU, none of the main political parties reflected this view: William Hague described the suggestion as "daft" and Andrew Marr summarised it as something "the establishment very much does not want".

Between the two EU Leaders' Summits in Feira in Portugal (2000) and Seville in 2002,²⁵ which dealt, *inter alia*, with asylum and immigration, an increased focus by the BBC on EU affairs might have been expected. But tracking of the BBC, particularly the Today programme, between 2000 and 2002 showed that the BBC failed to reflect these changes in the political landscape. In fact the BBC paid less attention to the EU at the very time

²⁴ John Humphreys description of the failure of the Irish to vote for the Nice treaty in their first referendum. *Irish Referendum on the Treaty of Nice*.

²⁵ Both of which fell into Minotaur tracking periods.

that EU developments were of critical importance to Britain. A sharp decline in coverage, of 56%, was recorded between the two summits. The overall proportion of programme time devoted to EU affairs on the Today programme dropped from 16% to 7% and the average length of features fell by one minute and twenty seconds.²⁶

While the launch of the euro was extensively covered,²⁷ many other EU stories were simply ignored. During the Seville Summit in June 2002 the Today programme dealt with fewer than half of the substantive issues raised in the same period by the broadsheet press,²⁸ a huge discrepancy which cannot be accounted for by the lesser space on the BBC airwaves.²⁹

Of the 34 EU stories covered by two or more broadsheet papers in the run-up to the Seville Summit, the Today programme only covered eight.

Of the 34 stories covered by two or more titles, Today carried only eight. Although Today reported one of the Summit's themes, asylum and immigration, it failed to cover adequately the steps towards enlargement, procedural reform and reform of competition and agricultural policies and the row over France's move away from the stability pact. Coverage in the Business News slot was particularly weak with 10 major stories significant for their absence.³⁰

Though there were no major domestic news stories, the number of domestic news items increased by 5% over the same period. This suggested a demotion in the importance of EU affairs by Today, as did the scheduling of EU items at the margins of the programme.³¹

Also conspicuous by its absence was the reporting of 'public' opinion or concern, as opposed to political (or parliamentary) attitudes, towards the EU, or any exploration of the discrepancy between the two. While the Conservatives appeared to retreat from tackling EU issues after their defeat in

²⁶ *Study finds further sharp fall in coverage of EU affairs by Today.* Press release Global Britain website.

²⁷ *The BBC and "Europe" – Introduction of the euro survey*, 1 January – 8 January, 2002. Eighty programme items were dedicated to the launch of the Euro notes and coins.

²⁸ A total of 169 items. Of the 34 stories covered by more than one title, Today carried only eight.

²⁹ An analysis of how much space the Today programme has in comparison to the broadsheets is presented in the same report.

³⁰ *Study finds further sharp fall in coverage of EU affairs by Today.* Press release Global Britain website.

³¹ *ibid.*

the General Election 2001, Eurosceptic opinion, alongside debate about the Euro, remained at the forefront of the broadsheet press. Many of these items were not covered at all by Today. At first sight the decision by Today to examine the implications of withdrawal from the EU in early 2001 seemed to be an exception.³² It was certainly a special attempt by the Corporation “to make certain that a wide range of voices are heard on our relationship with Europe”.³³ But a breakdown of what was broadcast shows that this aim was not met. A poll on the subject of withdrawal commissioned by the programme suggested that that 30% of Britons wished to do so. But there was no analysis of this finding other than from those who sought to minimise its importance such as Robin Cook and Chris Patten. Of 55 minutes coverage in three days of items that were supposedly exploring the case for withdrawal, only five sentences, amounting to 35 seconds, were actually delivered by someone putting the case for coming out.³⁴ There were no detailed interviews with anyone in favour of withdrawal.

A poll found that 30% of Britons favoured withdrawal from the EU... There were no detailed interviews with anyone in favour of that position

Also absent from these special programme items was debate about fears of or hopes for federalism, the alleged development of a superstate and the failures and need for reform of the CAP and CFP. No effort was made to examine the case for a free trade agreement with the EU, as an alternative to membership. Nor was there any exploration of the views of the political left about withdrawal. And the views of the Green party – that the EU represents the triumph of global capitalism – were not even given a look in.

In fact, Today hardly moved outside the parameters set by the views of politicians at Westminster – with Eurosceptics such as Bill Cash being chosen to make “the come-out” case with which they did not actually agree.

Finally, the limited amount of airtime devoted to EU issues gave rise to real difficulties for communicating and unravelling the complexity of the subject matter. The understandable response of the BBC’s presenters and reporters was to reduce whole areas of concern to a journalistic shorthand, a practice that had serious implications for audience comprehension. Today, during the summer of 2000, assumed a high level of background knowledge on the part of its audience. Phrases such as ‘The Maastricht Treaty’, ‘Tax Harmonisation’, ‘The Schengen Agreement’ and ‘EMU’ were mentioned frequently but their meanings and histories rarely explained.

³² *The BBC and “Europe” Today survey, 29 January– 3 February, 2001.*

³³ Mark Damazer speaking on Today programme, 29 January 2001.

³⁴ Nigel Farage of UKIP. There were also brief soundbites in favour of withdrawal from Lord Pearson of Rannoch and the then MP Christopher Gill.

3.2 “A DEPRESSION OF SUMMITS”

The European Summit on Enlargement (held in Brussels on 3 October 2002) was a major event in the development of the EU. However, Tim Franks, the BBC’s Europe correspondent branded it on air as boring:

It makes you wonder what a collective noun for so many summits is: perhaps a pile of summits, or a depression of summits?.....just in case you thought European politics couldn’t get more dreary or narrow minded, here’s Woody Allen in *El Pais* to cheer us all up.³⁵

This appeared to encapsulate the BBC’s attitude. With a total of 30 minutes airtime devoted to it, the summit was the eighth ranked story of the week on *Today*.³⁶

The coverage of the Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty was also limited in scope.³⁷ A central provision of the Nice Treaty was the change to majority voting between the member states. It also set the terms for the expansion of the EU to include East European countries. These issues were brought to the fore by the Irish referendum and were important to listeners in the UK who had had no opportunity to engage in the ratification process, or vote on it. Yet the referendum was presented as a domestic Irish concern with the only Eurosceptic viewpoint from a politician – interviewed in connection with the ‘no’ campaign – being a soundbite from Gerry Adams.³⁸

Reports on the day of the Irish referendum contained sweeping generalisations. John Humphrys for example, heavily pressed for time, stated that the previous ‘no’ vote had been an embarrassment to everybody – not taking into account that for the ‘no’ camp, it had been anything but.

Another worrying finding from this period was that of 178 speakers on EU related matters on the *Today* programme, only 8 came from outside the political parties. This was against a background of widespread broadsheet debate on issues such as the Convention, enlargement, fishing quotas and the CAP.

3.3 STEPS TOWARDS CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

The process towards constitutional change began with the Convention on the Future of Europe which was established at the European Council Summit in Laeken, Belgium in December 2001. The Declaration of Laeken involved Britain in a commitment to major constitutional changes in the EU.³⁹

³⁵ *EU Constitution report.*

³⁶ The Moscow Theatre siege received 97 minutes of coverage; Estelle Morris’s resignation: 70 minutes; Iraq: 59 minutes; Firemen’s strike: 52 minutes; historical events: 38 minutes; health service: 37 minutes; Washington sniper: 33 minutes.

³⁷ A total of 35 minutes in the entire nine week monitoring period including the week of the vote and its aftermath.

³⁸ *Irish Referendum on the Treaty of Nice.*

³⁹ The Declaration issued to announce the Convention on the Future of Europe was clear in its intention:

Discussions began in February 2002 and continued until June 2003 when a draft Constitution for Europe was presented at the European Council Summit in Thessaloniki. They took place alongside the enlargement programme.⁴⁰

With Europe appearing to be a low priority, Minotaur decided to introduce an external yardstick and track, analyse and compare European stories appearing in the national daily newspapers. A comparison between the coverage given by the Today programme and the broadsheet press during the month of January is illustrative. Today devoted only 5.1% of its air time to EU-related features and only a minority of stories appearing in the wider news agenda were broadcast. Dozens of topics were not mentioned at all. Many other stories were covered so briefly – typically shorter in length than other news features – that listeners were unlikely to develop an overview.⁴¹

The Today programme covered only 17% of the stories covered by the broadsheet press on the European Convention, and only 15% of EU legislation stories.

Wide variations in the attention paid to the key EU subject areas compared with the equivalent broadsheet press coverage were found. While Today carried 40% of the broadsheets coverage of the euro, it only carried 17% of that relating to the European Convention and 15% of EU legislation stories. Also of concern was the way in which EU stories often appeared as a ‘secondary issue’ – in tandem with other stories or tacked on to interviews with guests brought in on other issues.

As far as news bulletins were concerned, EU-related stories were consistently placed low in the running order, with just one exception out of 16 items. A story of particular importance – a deal finally reached on withholding tax after 13 years of deliberation, and impacting directly on the UK – was ignored by the programme. Business News scarcely covered European items at all, with just six mentions and three interviews in the 100 slots available in a month. This was at a time when there was an abundance of EU stories relating to monetary affairs. This suggests that the programme’s editorial remit did not extend to regular coverage of key EU directives and developments.

From September 2002 until May 2003, the Today programme broadcast only 14 reports on the Convention drawing up the new EU Constitution.

“The Union stands at a crossroads, a defining moment in its existence. The unification of Europe is near. At long last, Europe is on its way to becoming one big family.”

⁴⁰ Minotaur started a ten month continuous tracking study, divided into five phases, of the Today programme in September 2002.

⁴¹ The average length of an EU story in January 2003 was just two minutes. *BBC Radio 4 Today and “Europe” newspaper comparison*, 6 January – 8 March, 2003.

The final tracking phase of the ten-month study⁴² coincided with the Chancellor's assessment of the five economic tests and the presentation of Giscard d'Estaing's draft constitution for Europe. As it approached, the draft constitution dominated the wider news agenda. For the first time since monitoring had begun in 1999, there was a marked increase in Today's level of EU coverage.⁴³

However, the Today programme excluded members of the public from the debate almost totally. Its failure to move outside the parameters of Westminster distanced the broadcasts from the reality of public concern which was demonstrably high.⁴⁴ Moreover the exclusion of public opinion from the discussion produced its own problems for the Today programme. The only reflection of public opinion was the presenters' discussion of newspaper campaigns – such as that of the *Daily Mail* – in the newspaper review slot.

Coverage of the Brussels summit at which the EU constitution was meant to be finalised was limited to three minutes 45 seconds a day.

3.4 COLLAPSE OF THE CONSTITUTION

The Brussels summit in December 2003 was arguably one of the most important in the history of the EU. The aim was to ratify a Constitution which would reform the EU's institutions, structures and processes to provide for an enlarged membership and to endow it with greater powers. The determination by the British Government to move ahead with the endorsement of the Constitution against widespread calls for a referendum – some from within its own party - caused one of the biggest ideological and procedural arguments of the second Blair period in office.

While this debate was going on in Westminster, polls have suggested that the British population was becoming more Eurosceptic.⁴⁵ And with the Euro kicked into touch by its failure to meet the Chancellor's 'five economic tests' deadline in June 2003, pro-Euro pressure groups appeared to be in retreat.⁴⁶

⁴² 12 May – 13 July 2003.

⁴³ See Appendix I for the full breakdown.

⁴⁴ A You Gov Poll on 15 May found that 75% sampled supported a referendum on the Constitution while Populus reported on the same day a figure of 84%.

⁴⁵ See Peter Riddell, *The Times*, 7 January, 2004.

⁴⁶ Simon Buckby announced his resignation as Director of the Britain in Europe Campaign and that the lobby group would be scaled back. He complained that the Government had suffered a loss of confidence over the euro and failed to follow a consistent strategy. *The Guardian*, 10 September 2003.

Against this background it was expected that the Today programme would scrutinise the agenda of the Convention in the weeks leading up to the adoption of a new Constitution at the Brussels Summit, in reasonable depth and from a variety of standpoints. Minotaur tracked the Today programme for 12 weeks from 29 September to 20 December including the Summit itself on 13 December to see how it would be handled. Despite peaking in the week before the summit, overall coverage remained low and similar to average levels of previous tracking periods. Only in the final week did it reach an average of seven minutes per day (this was most concentrated in the last two days) when it featured as the second most important story (after Saddam Hussein's capture) on the programme's news agenda.⁴⁷

But the opportunities to discuss and analyse the proposals contained within the draft Constitution were at their height during the various Intergovernmental Conferences held in October and November. Tim Franks, the BBC's EU Correspondent, assumed, as before, that listeners would not find them of much interest, opening one of his on air conversations with: "it's not stuff to get the heart beating wildly". After struggling to explain what the Conference was about he continued, "And before everybody turns over and goes back to sleep, what that means is really how the European Union can work in a Europe of 25."⁴⁸

A breakdown of the ingredients of the Today programme's coverage revealed that these live conversations between presenter and correspondent, known in the trade as 'two ways' were the fulcrum or mainstay of its EU coverage, making up 30% of the time given to it. This proportion of 'in house' conversation begged the question of how dispassionate, enlightening and appropriate it was for such a controversial and complex issue?

The answer in many cases was, not very. An examination of one four-minute discussion between John Humphrys and EU Correspondent Tim Franks, showed they favoured the official EU perspective on the purpose and the aims of the Constitution document.⁴⁹ It showed their consideration of Eurosceptic opinion was relegated to a fleeting exchange. Although it provided listeners with a description of the British Government's stance on the so called 'red lines' on tax, social security and law, very little was given by way of explanation or background.

As far as the issue of reporting public opinion was concerned, opposition to the Constitution and calls for a referendum were referred to in vague terms despite available evidence of strong demand for a popular vote. Polls published shortly before one of his reports showed 80% to 90% of public

⁴⁷ *BBC and Europe EU Brussels Constitution Summit Report.*

⁴⁸ 16 October 2003.

⁴⁹ Today 3 October 2003 6.39 am, the day before the Inter Governmental Conference convened in Rome.

opinion in favour of a referendum, but Tim Franks only mentioned a ‘clear majority’ and left the listener to infer what this might constitute.⁵⁰

The Today programme is regarded by the BBC as its flagship news and current affairs programme. It amounts to 17 hours of output per week and has millions of listeners. But in the two weeks leading up to the Brussels Summit the key arguments for and against the Constitution were compressed into just four one-to-one interviews, one each with Jack Straw, Chris Patten, Michael Ancram and Neil Kinnock⁵¹ - these being the only interviews dedicated to discussion of the Constitution.

The total coverage of EU issues in these two weeks, taking up only seven per cent of the programme time, was still narrow. There was little explicit information on, or analysis of, the Government’s policy; or of what a ratified Constitution would mean for Britain. By the end of the period it was still unclear to the listener of the Today programme whether the Government’s so called ‘red lines’ had held.

There were also some troubling imbalances. While Brendan Barber was given free rein to challenge Britain’s exemption from the Working Time Directive,⁵² Gisela Stuart’s eleventh hour decision to challenge the Constitution and withdraw from the Convention was seriously under-reported and under-represented.⁵³ Equally there was little consideration of the decision of former Europe Minister Keith Vaz to support Ms Stuart and to call for a referendum.⁵⁴ This was in marked contrast to Today’s treatment of Ms Stuart earlier in October, when she was still proposing that the Government’s line should be for acceptance of the Constitution. In this interview she was given twice the time of her co-interviewee – Lord Weatherill – and questioned on a more sympathetic basis.⁵⁵

It was also not clear why the normally tenacious John Humphrys failed to pin Mr Straw down on either his former Europe Minister’s or Gisela Stuart’s volte face or what this meant for Government policy.⁵⁶

It is worrying that one effect of what was broadcast by Today may have been to diminish and trivialise the political process taking place.

⁵⁰ You Gov Poll, 15 October 2003.

⁵¹ Lord Lamont was included in a short two hander interview on 13 December 2003.

⁵² Today, 1 December 2003.

⁵³ Gisela Stuart was the Labour Government’s main representative on the Convention responsible for drawing up the Constitution. She took part in a two-handed interview with Pat Cox, on Today on 8 December 2003, the morning after her announcement and the publication by her of a major critical article on the Convention in the *Sunday Times*.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Today, 3 October 2003.

⁵⁶ Today, 12 December 2003.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHY DOES THE BBC FAIL?

4.1 IS THE EU IMPORTANT?

The BBC's coverage of Europe has been poor. And it is possible that the BBC's neglect in the past has contributed to public apathy.

The monitoring of the BBC's coverage of the EU has established conclusively that it is low on the BBC's news agenda.

After the last election some five years ago, one justification given by the BBC for its inattention was that the European Election was covered by the BBC's regional programmes.⁵⁷ This argument appears to be based on the assumption that the European Elections and the issue of the single currency were only of marginal national news significance.

The pattern of output also suggests that, despite criticism, the BBC has not yet engaged in an examination of how to respond to the wider political landscape of the EU.

Why this is the case is hard to say. The inescapable fact is that EU institutions and law, alongside Parliament, are of great political and economic significance to British life. The EU – from the Charter of Human Rights to the Social Chapter, from agreements on trade to the regulation of chemical emissions and the working time directives – touches on every aspect and at every level of public life. The BBC, if it is to fulfil its public service remit, must do better.

⁵⁷ Letter of 22 July 1999. This may or may not have been the case. Minotaur did not monitor regional programmes and Sir Christopher did not provide further details.

4.2 IS THE EU TOO 'BORING'?

News lies on an axis between what is important and what is interesting. While there is no argument about the importance of the EU, it seems clear from the frequent asides of BBC presenters and correspondents that they deem it boring. The EU poses an enormous challenge to any reporter. A search of official EU websites shows how daunting is the task of keeping track of all the various protocols, treaties, and directives. It is likely that this very complexity is a factor in the BBC's reluctance to cover the EU. Research carried out by the Pew Centre in the US in 2000 found that among senior editors, a major cause of not carrying certain important stories was that they were too complex.⁵⁸

For the BBC to claim that the EU is "too boring" or "too complex" is not an acceptable excuse for inadequate coverage of the EU.

But too boring or too complex can become self-fulfilling prophecies. The impact is that important shifts in gear are either missed completely or under-reported. As reasons or justifications for limiting coverage, they are simply not good enough – especially for an organisation of the stature and with the resources of the BBC. Similarly an acceptance that the EU process is simply happening, and that developments are therefore not really newsworthy, is unworthy of the world's premier public service broadcaster.

However the EU develops, as superstate or a loose federation, and whatever Britain's exact role within it, following it and reporting it should be central to the BBC's public service remit. It is after all a subject on which the British public has strong views.

4.3 WESTMINSTER OR PUBLIC OPINION?

The three main political parties are all in favour of Britain's continued membership of the EU. As a result, as the BBC appears to have argued, the general political consensus gives little incentive to analyse EU developments in the same way as it does more contentious issues.⁵⁹ The BBC may also, in view of our parliamentary system, reflect unease about encouraging "referendum politics". A caution about knee-jerk pandering to public opinion on potentially inflammatory issues (like capital punishment or immigration for example) is correct and understandable. But such a sense of

⁵⁸ See Peter Preston, *Observer*, 11 June, 2000

⁵⁹ According to Sir Christopher Bland then Chairman of the BBC Board of Governors: "Our main priority at election time is to achieve due weight in our coverage both of the larger parties and of those other parties who put up a full list of candidates." (quoted from a letter to Lord Stoddart of 22 July 1999).

public responsibility as applied to the EU and Britain's membership of it is misplaced and leads to narrow reporting⁶⁰.

One aspect of the BBC's failure to cover the EU is the limited range of voices heard on the subject. Over the last five years, opinion polls – including those carried out by the EU itself – have consistently shown that around 30% of the electorate are in favour of leaving the EU. But these voices are hardly ever heard in the BBC's coverage.⁶¹

This could also be a factor in increasing public disinterest in political coverage. If a particular point of view is not reflected, voters may simply switch off, and also decide not to vote.

4.4 A CHANGING BROADCASTING ENVIRONMENT?

If the BBC appears to have been casual in the delivery of its public service obligation, perhaps it is less surprising if looked at in the context of the changing broadcasting environment over the last ten years. The revolution in broadcasting technology during the 1990s transformed news gathering and editing. It has been argued that the new journalism it led to is lower in quality. Under the pressure of rolling 24 hour news services – with instant delivery and the need to fill the airtime - reporting, in this view, became less informed and more performed.

In addition, successive Broadcasting Acts have removed the requirement placed on ITV companies to submit quarterly planning documents listing in advance subjects and events to be covered to their regulator (the former Independent Broadcasting Authority).⁶²

There is no longer an external system such as this to check the balance and mix of coverage: broadcasters are relied on to regulate themselves. This has freed ITN to follow a news agenda aimed at attracting the maximum number of viewers, putting the BBC under pressure to compete. Sports coverage has been elevated to new levels of importance while 'unsexy' topics such as the EU have had to fight harder and harder for space. Where ITV led the BBC followed, perhaps without realising the significance of what they were abandoning.

⁶⁰ There were only 13 appearances by UKIP party spokesmen in the 2,200 programme feature transcripts created by Minotaur in its monitoring work.

⁶¹ Eurosceptics argue consistently that one of the major problems with the EU project is that it is developing by stealth, that behind the closed doors in Brussels plans are hatched which become directives and laws without sufficient scrutiny. They are particularly concerned therefore about the BBC's coverage of Europe.

⁶² Now the Independent Television Commission or ITC.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUGGESTIONS

With the digital revolution and the fragmentation of broadcasting it is more important than ever that the BBC fulfils its public service obligations – in order to maintain standards and to provide a democratic forum for informed debate.

It is arguable then that the EU deserves special attention from the BBC.

In the wake of the Hutton report, the Corporation has set up a committee to identify the editorial lessons to be learnt from Lord Hutton's conclusions. The following suggestions are intended as a contribution to the debate as well as to public discussion about the BBC's public service *raison d'être* in the build-up to Charter renewal .

The creation of an EU affairs special slot would encourage a continuing story-line and create a day-by-day sense of what was actually happening in the EU

The suggestions are not intended to be prescriptive. 'Goals' and targets can all too easily be narrowly interpreted, invite bureaucratic evaluation procedures and thereby end up being counter-productive. But there is a strong case to be made for the BBC to dedicate special airtime and special efforts if it is to improve the pattern and style of coverage.

This would be in keeping with other 'protected' spots on BBC programmes, including weather, sport, business news, Parliamentary reporting, and world and UK press reviews. The creation of an EU affairs special slot would

encourage a continuing story-line and create a day-by-day sense of what was actually happening in the EU. It would deal with a range of topics, including the doings of MEPs, the affairs of the Council of Ministers, the Commission, the European Court of Justice, the development of new legislation and directives, along with the shifting alliances and divisions among the member states. Without doubt, such dedicated slots would raise the level of regular information, background understanding and interest.

The BBC also needs to be more wide ranging and braver in the 'voices' and views about the EU that it broadcasts – even if some of these reflect 'planet *Daily Mail*' rather than the *Guardian*, and even if some are drawn from marginal groups such as the Greens or protesters against global capitalism.

In previous years ITN included a daily election slot dedicated to the campaign during the elections to the European Parliament. The BBC could do the same in the build up to and during the period of the next Election to the European Parliament on 10 June. These could begin with being informative backgrounders and move, as the campaign unfolds, to being news reactive.

The BBC could also consider the appointment of a senior journalist to a new position of EU Editor

In order to galvanise thinking about the coverage of the EU, the BBC could also consider the appointment of a senior journalist to a new position of EU Editor. This role could be modelled on the successful appointment of Jeff Randall as Business Editor with a specific remit to improve the BBC's business coverage across all programmes. The EU Editor's job would similarly be to ensure that the implications of EU developments were considered thoroughly and impartially throughout the BBC's output. It would, of course, be vital to ensure that the EU editor was scrupulously impartial in his approach to EU affairs.

Consideration should be given to assigning some of its most senior reporters – such as Robin Denselow, and Brian Hanrahan – to the job of scrutinising the EU, its ambitions, its policies and their impact. Their investigations should be supported by adequate time and resources.

Comprehensive monitoring may also reveal patterns of coverage and gives signals as to when programming is becoming too predictable or too narrowly based. This study is based on checking more than one million words of BBC output of EU affairs: should not the BBC invest in and continue with similar monitoring work? If so, this should be independently run with results regularly published and debated on the BBC website. As one of the lessons of Hutton, the BBC should be confident enough to subject itself to such scrutiny and the public deserves it. The Corporation cannot continue to be the judge and jury of its own affairs.

APPENDIX I: TRACKING PERIODS AND REPORTS

Minotaur has tracked and analysed more than 2000 hours of television and radio programming over the last five years. There have been ten individual tracking periods, and 15 detailed reports into EU coverage. The tracking periods and reports are listed below.

Dates of coverage	Subject matter	Programmes covered	Length of coverage
9 May – 12 June 1999	Reporting of Elections to European Parliament	BBC UK Terrestrial News Programmes	600 hours
22 May – 21 July 2000	European Coverage	Radio 4 Today programme	153 hours
2 June – 22 June 2000	EU Heads of Government Summit, Feira, Portugal	Radio 4 Today programme	51 hours
30 January – 1 February 2001	The BBC and "Europe" Today survey,	Radio 4 Today programme special items	17 hours
19 February – 24 February 2001	'Europe and Us' Week	BBC News and Documentary strands including: Today, On the Record, Referendum Street, Farming Today, Nicky Campbell, 5 Live, Newsround, Churchill the European, the Citizens, Food Wars, Question Time. Also included an assessment of the BBC 'Europe and Us' website	26 hours
14 May – 7 June 2001	General Election	BBC News programming, including: Today, PM, BBC Radio 4: Ten o'clock News, Newsnight	117 hours
1 January – 8 January 2002	Launch of Euro Notes and Coins	BBC News programming, including: Today, PM, BBC TV Ten O'clock News, Newsnight	31 hours
4 – 24 June 2002	EU Heads of Government Summit, Seville	Radio 4 Today programme	51 hours
1 Sept. 2002 – 15 July 2003	Europe coverage*	Radio 4 Today programme	762 hours
29 Sept. – 20 Dec. 2003	Europe and the European Constitution	Radio 4 Today programme	204 hours

- * Six reports were generated from this period of monitoring:
- i. Irish Referendum on the Treaty of Nice
 - ii. Enlargement Summit Brussels
 - iii. EU Heads of Government Summit, Copenhagen
 - iv. Comparisons of European Coverage on Today with Reports in the British Press
 - v. Today and the Convention on the Future of Europe
 - vi. Today and Silvio Berlusconi

APPENDIX II: SUBJECT DISTRIBUTION

During extended monitoring periods, every news item broadcast by the Today programme was individually timed and placed into one of six separate categories. The table below shows the proportion of the programme given over to different types of news. (The 45-week continuous monitoring exercise undertaken in 2002-3 was divided into five nine-week phases.)

	9-week project, Summer 2000	45-week continuous monitoring Sep 2002 – July 2003					12-week project, Autumn 2003
		Sep 2 – Nov 2	Nov 4 – Jan 4	Jan 6 – Mar 8	Mar 10 – May 10	May 12 – July 12	
Home Affairs	49.3%	44.3%	50.7%	48.2%	36.0%	41.0%	49.0%
World News	17.4%	33.2%	25.6%	29.3%	47.6%	26.0%	23.1%
European Union	9.0%	5.0%	4.2%	4.2%	2.5%	12.0%	5.7%
Science	11.2%	5.8%	5.6%	6.3%	3.9%	5.7%	5.9%
Arts, Culture, Sport	8.2%	9.5%	9.8%	9.3%	7.9%	11.2%	12.3%
Transport	4.9%	2.2%	4.1%	2.7%	2.0%	4.1%	3.9%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

The proportions of EU stories as shown in this table represent an absolute maximum. In compiling these totals, the ‘Europe’ category took precedence over the five others. For example, a feature on European Parliament air travel legislation would be categorised solely as a ‘Europe’ story, rather than a ‘Transport’ story, or a combination of both. The only exception occurred when there was a clear delineation within a package: for example, a minister being asked a series of questions on the EU, followed by questions on a Home Affairs issue. Here, the discrete sections of a particular report were individually timed and added to the appropriate category. This methodology ensured that the totals for European Union coverage were not influenced by the judgement of the monitoring team. However, had the broad subject distribution categories been able to reflect the mixed items more accurately, then empirical evidence demonstrates that the actual proportion of EU stories broadcast by Today would have been markedly lower than the totals presented here.

APPENDIX III: **METHODOLOGY**

Minotaur Media Monitoring devised a straightforward methodology based on robust empirical principles. The process has involved the recording, logging and archiving of every programme in its entirety, and the full transcription, scheduling position and timing of any item relevant to the European Union and its relationship to the UK.

Over 2000 hours of broadcast output has been monitored to date, generating 2,289 individual transcripts running to more than one million words.

Minotaur has applied a range of study approaches, including listing, identifying and timing contributors, comparing the output of the Today programme and European content with that carried in broadsheet newspapers, and analysing the rate of delivery of EU-related items compared to those on other topics. Detailed statistical information is compiled during each survey and entered into a customised database, allowing for long term trends to be identified, and European Union stories to be assessed in the context of the wider news agenda.

The Today programme has been chosen as the most frequently monitored output because it is the BBC's flagship news and current affairs programme.