POLITICS AND POLITICIANS

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1 POLITICAL IMPARTIALITY

The BBC’s Charter and Agreement sets out certain principles, which are central to the BBC’s coverage of politics:

• it requires programmes to “contain comprehensive, authoritative and impartial coverage of news and current affairs in the United Kingdom and throughout the world to support fair and informed debate at local, regional and national levels”

• it requires the BBC to treat controversial subjects with “due accuracy and impartiality, both in the Corporation’s news services and in the more general field of programmes dealing with matters of public policy or of political or industrial controversy”.

In practice this means that the BBC aims, over time, to give due prominence to all the main strands of argument and to all the main parties. Although the government of the day will often be the primary source of news, the voices and opinions of opposition parties must also be aired and challenged.

All networked coverage must also reflect the different disposition of political parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. For this reason specific party labels are preferable to general descriptions of ‘the opposition’. The exception to this is in phrases like “the Official Opposition” and titles like ‘the Leader of the Opposition’ which in the Westminster context have a formal and specific meaning.

The agreement (5.1.c) also explicitly commits the BBC to refrain from “expressing the opinion of the Corporation on current affairs or matters of public policy”. This does not mean that judgements may not be made by correspondents – indeed these are an important part of the BBC’s service to its audience. It does mean that a broadcaster’s personal views on any controversial aspect of public policy should not be evident on-air (see also section 2.2 of Part One of Chapter One: Impartiality and Accuracy).

2 POLITICAL INTERVIEWS

Requests for political interviews should be unambiguous about the programme and context for which they are intended.
When a politician is invited, but refuses or is unable to appear, this should not normally act as a veto on the appearance of other politicians or outside speakers holding different views. However, there may be occasions where the refusal of a key player to take part, invalidates the idea behind the programme proposal.

Anyone has a perfect right to refuse to appear in a programme. It is not normally necessary to mention such a refusal on-air. However when the audience might reasonably ask why an individual, viewpoint or party is not represented, it may be appropriate to explain that they were invited and chose not to take part. Programmes should refrain from speculating about the reason for such a refusal.

Politicians or indeed other contributors will sometimes try to place conditions upon programmes before agreeing to appear. Any arrangements must stand public scrutiny and must not prevent the programme asking questions that audiences would reasonably expect to hear asked. In particular if the location for a programme is chosen not for editorial reasons, but for logistical ones (e.g. availability in that place at that time of the politician in question), producers should ensure that the context and the immediate environment are determined by the BBC and not chosen by the contributors for possible party advantage.

Politicians often possess expertise outside the political field, which makes them valuable contributors to, even presenters of, programmes across a wide range of subjects and genres. However care must be taken to ensure that the BBC’s casting decisions, made on valid editorial and programme grounds, do not give any politician such prominence as to give them undue advantage over their opponents. Such considerations cannot be confined to election campaigns. The dates of many elections are known months in advance; politicians and potential candidates can gain undue advantage long before an election campaign actually starts. Producers in any doubt on the appropriateness of inviting any contributor or presenter who carries an overt party political label should consult the Chief Political Adviser.

Programmes where invitations to politicians as guests are exceptional rather than regular practice, should seek the advice of the Chief Political Adviser at an early stage of programme planning.
2.1 Interviews With Party Leaders

Except for brief news interviews, any BBC programme proposing to interview any of the leaders of parties in the United Kingdom must refer to the Chief Political Adviser in advance. The Chief Political Adviser should also be notified whether such invitations are refused or accepted.

The referral ensures that:

- the BBC as a whole is robust and consistent in its dealings with the party leaders
- at all times of high demand for one or more party leaders, bids are rationalised within the BBC
- over time, due weight is given to appearances by all party leaders.

2.2 Payment To MPs

MPs at Westminster, Members of the European Parliament, Members of the Scottish Parliament, Assembly Members of the National Assembly of Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly and politically active members of the House of Lords, who appear on BBC news programmes, will not normally be paid for their contributions. Their appearances on radio or television to express political views are part of political life and payment is not appropriate. This applies when they answer questions on subjects such as public policy, international affairs, party politics or constituency issues.

If their contribution to a programme is outside the normal course of their duties, politicians may be paid a fee which reflects the amount of preparation required, the length of time spent making the contribution, and the value of the contributor's particular degree of expertise. The fee should not exceed that which might be paid to other individuals for similar contributions.

Programmes sometimes secure the services of politicians for a substantial period to make a number of contributions whether on political or other matters during the course of a programme. In these circumstances a fee may be paid which would recognise, among other things, that contributors may have to decline other offers including invitations from other broadcasters.
For any contribution politicians may be paid a “disturbance fee” to cover factors such as substantial travel time to a BBC location or attendance during unsociable hours (after 10p.m., before 11a.m., or on Sundays). However this will usually be a nominal amount and must relate to real inconveniences. It must not be used to circumvent the guideline on payment of fees.

Politicians who hold government office or executive office in any elected assembly or who have party front bench responsibilities do not qualify for a fee under any circumstances, including a disturbance fee. Those who chair Parliamentary Committees and leaders of political parties do not qualify either.

3 PARLIAMENTARY BROADCASTING

3.1 Parliament at Westminster

There are rules laid down by Parliament for the broadcasting of proceedings in both Houses. These cover, for instance, the nature of shooting and editing. The pictures from both the House of Commons and the House of Lords are made available for the broadcasters by the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit.

Broadcasters are allowed to use the pictures and sound under certain conditions including:

• no internal editing of speeches. When using use two sections of a speech, a definite break must be provided to make clear the two sections are not continuous

• no graphic enhancement or alteration of the pictures. For example one or a group of MPs must not be highlighted and the framing must not be changed

• no speeding up or slowing down of the pictures or sound.

If in doubt seek detailed guidance from Political Programmes at Millbank.

Parliamentary material can be used only in news and factual programmes or for educational purposes. No Parliamentary recording may be used in light entertainment, or fictional or drama programmes, or programmes of political satire. Parliamentary material may be used in the factual parts of magazine programmes but must always be kept separate from musical, fictional or humorous items.
Parliamentary committees can usually be broadcast even if they are sitting away from Westminster, but the broadcasters have to commission coverage in advance. Again BBC Political Programmes at Millbank can help.

3.2 The Scottish Parliament
As with Westminster, actuality can only be used in news and factual programmes. No recording may be used in light entertainment, fictional or drama programmes or programmes of political satire.

The rules for coverage are however much more relaxed than those for Westminster. The guiding principle is that of the “gallery surrogate”: that television viewers should be given the chance to witness everything they could see if they were in the public gallery of the Parliament itself. For example:

• internal editing is allowed but “broadcasters should not distort the meaning of MSP speeches in edits”

• cutaways are allowed

• the arrival of prominent members in the Chamber and shots of the public gallery are allowed.

A full copy of the rules of coverage and details of how to obtain access to BBC recordings are available from the Editor of the Scottish Parliament Unit via BH Edinburgh.

3.3 The National Assembly for Wales
The same conditions apply on use of material in non-news programmes as those in Westminster and Scotland. The Code of Conduct is similar to that in Scotland with the exception that no demonstration or interference by the public can be shown. A full copy of the Code is available from BBC Wales’ political editor and anyone seeking access to BBC recordings should contact the News Organiser in the BBC Wales’ political unit in BH Llandaff.

3.4 The Northern Ireland Assembly
The same conditions apply on use of material in non-news programmes as those in Westminster.
3.5 **The European Parliament**

BBC Westminster can also advise programme makers about how to obtain coverage from sittings of the European Parliament or its committees. Up-to-date information about recent and forthcoming business is available from the BBC Political Research Unit based at Millbank.

3.6 **Legal Protection**

Most statements made in Parliament at Westminster, in the other devolved parliaments and assemblies in the United Kingdom and in the European Parliament, enjoy qualified privilege when they are reported fairly and accurately. This gives a defence to libel, but it does not extend to reporting things shouted by non-Members in the Public Gallery or things said by Members overheard talking among themselves. There is no defence of privilege available for reporters or broadcasters when they repeat what is said in Parliament where there is a risk of contempt. There is no automatic legal protection against the risk of contempt during a live relay of a Parliament or Assembly, but the Speaker or Deputy Speaker is normally quick to intervene to stop remarks which risk contempt. There is no qualified privilege for Members who repeat allegations outside the house.

**Chief Political Adviser is available to offer advice on all aspects of political editorial matters.**
OPINION POLLS

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1 COMMISSIONING OPINION POLLS

There are many circumstances where polls may add value to programmes and augment our journalism but care must be taken to ensure that a poll commissioned by the BBC is not used to suggest a BBC view on a particular policy or issue. It is particularly important that a BBC poll is not used to imply BBC intervention in a current controversy. Only in very rare circumstances does the BBC commission or sponsor opinion polls purporting to sample party political support or voting intentions in the electorate at large. Joint polls with other organisations often carry particular problems of impartiality in presentation and should be avoided.

Any proposal to commission an opinion poll on politics or any other matter of public policy for any BBC service should be referred to the Chief Political Adviser for approval. Technical advice should also be sought from the Political Research Unit.

2 REPORTING OPINION POLLS

The following rules for reporting the findings of voting intention polls in the United Kingdom conducted by any polling organisation must be rigorously applied:

• do not lead a news bulletin or programme simply with the results of a voting intention poll

• do not headline the results of a voting intention poll unless it has prompted a story which itself deserves a headline and reference to the poll’s findings is necessary to make sense of it

• do not rely on the interpretation given to a poll’s results by the organisation or publication which commissioned it: look at the questions, the results and the trend

• report the findings of voting intentions polls in the context of trend. The trend may consist of the results of all major polls over a period or may be limited to the change in a single pollster’s findings. Poll results which defy trends without convincing explanation should be treated with particular scepticism and caution

• do not use language which gives greater credibility to the polls than they deserve: polls “suggest” but never “prove” or even “show”
• report the expected margin of error if the gap between the contenders is within the margin. On television and online, graphics should always show the margin of error

• report the organisation which carried out the poll and the organisation or publication which commissioned it

• report the dates of the fieldwork and draw attention to events which may have had a significant effect on public opinion since it was done (e.g. “The poll was carried out last Monday, before the party announced.....”).

3 POLLS AT ELECTION TIMES
As with all political reporting, special care has to be taken in reporting polls at election times.

BBC policy takes into account three key factors:

• polls should not be ignored during the campaign. They are part of the story and audiences should be informed about them

• but, context is essential, and so is the language used in reporting them

• polls can be wrong. There are real dangers in only reporting the most “newsworthy” polls – i.e. those which, on a one-off basis, show dramatic movement.

So, in addition to the stipulations about polls in general (see previous section), coverage of polls at election times will:

• pre-select the main polls

• report the selected polls on a regular basis on the same outlets throughout the campaign

• report even single polls, in context. For example, on television the graphic will never be separated from the explanatory piece.

Detailed guidance as to how this policy should be implemented in practice will be issued by the Chief Political Adviser before the start of the campaign.
4 POLLS FOR USE IN ELECTION RESULTS PROGRAMMES
In spite of the considerable thought and effort which has gone into refining the methodology, exit polls have not proved a sufficiently reliable way of predicting the results of elections. Our journalistic credibility is based on the audience’s expectation that information the BBC broadcasts is accurate.

Polls carried out on polling day, by whatever method, have their limitations and should be seen for what they are – a device to sustain the programme until the real results come in. They may give an indication of the way things are going, but because of the pitfalls of sampling error, should always be used in bands, as in “it looks as if x are to be the biggest party with between x and y seats”. A precise seat projection should wait for sufficient real results to establish the actual trend.

5 SURVEYS
When used responsibly surveys of small specific groups like MPs or health authorities can be a very useful way of informing our audience and gathering information, but like opinion polls they must be both conducted and reported with care and after seeking appropriate advice. Contact should be made at an early stage both with the Political Research Unit, who will advise as to whether the survey is practical, and with the Chief Political Adviser, who will advise on the necessary thresholds for responses and on appropriate content.

Surveys must never be reported as polls. The audience should be in no doubt about the status of the information they are receiving. Their remits should not be translated into percentages but reported in straight numbers e.g.: “Of the 81 MPs in this group we spoke to 60, of whom 40 were in favour of x and 20 were opposed to it”.

6 PHONE-IN POLLS AND STUDIO AUDIENCES
Phone-in polls (unlike professionally conducted polls using the telephone) rely on people telephoning in to register a vote. Phone-in polls may accurately be described as “straw polls” even when the subject is serious. Programmes which want to carry them out need to understand their severe limitations. They do not sample opinion; they are simply a programme device which illustrates certain viewpoints. A programme’s audience is self-selected and is never representative of the population. When asked to give views on a topic, a minority, again self-selected, responds. If voting takes place during an extended period it may encourage repeat voting by people who feel strongly about the issue.
Questions in phone-in polls should be as neutrally worded as the context calls for. Slanted questions give slanted results.

Phone-in polls must never be used by programmes as a means of gathering serious information on party political support. In other contexts phone-in polls may produce interesting, even impressive results (“Ten thousand of our listeners/viewers called in and they are four to one in favour of…”). But we should make clear that the results have no wider significance.

The results of phone-in polls are not even remotely indicative of wider opinion and programmes must not treat them in any way which implies that they are. Consequently publicity should not be sought for the results of phone-in polls outside of the programmes in which they are conducted. BBC News programmes should not normally report the results of phone-in polls.

Programmes which feature phone-in polls on the same subject taken at different times (for example at the start of the programme and again at the end) must not present the results in such a way as to suggest that they demonstrate a shift in opinion by the people who voted.

Straw polls of the views of studio audiences should be treated with similar care. No claims should be made for the significance of the views expressed beyond that they represent the opinions of those in the audience at the time, even on those occasions where the audience has been selected to be broadly representative of, for example, party allegiance. Again, questions need to be properly framed.

7 FOCUS GROUPS AND PANELS

The same principles apply to the use of panels or focus groups. It is inappropriate to imply that the views of panels, however carefully selected, could represent the views of the entire population, and they must not be used as a means of trying to estimate party support in the electorate at large. Panels or focus groups, when properly selected, may be more appropriately used to examine why certain views are held rather than the extent to which they are held.

The advice of the Chief Political Adviser should be sought before commissioning any focus group research on political party issues and the methodology should be checked with the Political Research Unit.
8 **VOX POPS**

Vox pop interviews do not even remotely indicate wider public opinion. Their value to programmes is to allow different sides of an issue in question to be expressed through the voices of the man and woman in the street. But the context should always make it clear that they are an expression of an argument, not an indication of the weight of opinion on either side of it. It follows that great care must be taken with vox pops on politics or matters of public policy to edit them in such a way as to ensure both sides of the issue are covered.

9 **ONLINE AND NEW MEDIA**

The principles outlined in this chapter apply with equal force to online sites and to other new forms of interactive voting (e.g. interactive television).

Interactivity of every sort is part of the central appeal of any online site. However, on BBC sites, especially News Online and programme sites which may relate to political or public policy issues, care has to be taken that expressions of opinion are not translated into anything that could be construed either as the BBC’s opinion or as an accurate representation of public opinion as a whole. So any summary of online voting or expression of opinion must:

- not be called a poll
- not be reported in BBC editorial content, whether on or off the site
- not be expressed in percentage terms. The results should be expressed in terms of how many hits the “yes” button has received and how many the “no” button.

Any summary of online voting or expression of opinion about political or public policy issues must include a disclaimer to the effect that “this is not a representative poll and the figures do not purport to represent public opinion as a whole on this issue”.

There is no formal legal obligation on the BBC to make airtime available for party broadcasts but in the absence of political advertising in the UK it has traditionally offered unmediated airtime to the political parties as one element in the range of sources of political information available to the audience.

There are series of election broadcasts in the campaigns for General Elections, and elections to the European Parliament, Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Local Authorities throughout the UK.

In addition, broadcasts are offered to the parties at key points in the annual political cycle, for example the Budget and the Queen's Speech.

Party broadcasts are quite separate from the BBC's own journalism and their transmission does not imply BBC support for the views contained in them. Parties make these broadcasts at their own expense and are responsible for their content. However they do have to abide by ground rules laid down by the BBC and the ITC, which include an obligation to observe the law, for example on libel, incitement to racial hatred and violence and to the broadcasters' own guidelines on taste and decency. These ground rules are available on request from the Chief Political Adviser.

In truly exceptional circumstances giving rise to widespread national anxiety or concern, the BBC and ITV (Channel 3), provide the opportunity for a direct address to the nation by the Prime Minister or relevant senior minister should this be requested. In this event appropriate arrangements, in as short a time span as possible, will be made for responses by the leaders of the opposition parties.