Guidance for all BBC Programme Makers
during the General Election Campaign

There is no area of broadcasting where the BBC’s commitment to impartiality is more closely scrutinised than in reporting election campaigns.

Election 2001 will present us with a number of specific new challenges: –

- Devolution has changed the political map of the UK. We are effectively dealing with 3 main parties in England, and a different combination of 4 main parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In addition minor parties, have had significant electoral successes under PR elections which have taken place since 1997.

- This will be the first full Online election.

- The abolition of Section 93 of the RPA will enable programme makers to make far more extensive use of candidates and we will have new guidelines to ensure fairness particularly in constituency reports.

These guidance notes, which supplement Chapters 2 and 34 of the Producers’ Guidelines, have been drawn up following extensive consultation with a wide range of BBC programme makers across the UK who will have to make them work in practice. They are intended to offer a framework within which –

- Journalists can operate in as free and creative an environment as possible.

- Whilst scrupulously delivering to audiences impartial reporting of the campaign which gives them fair coverage and rigorous scrutiny of the policies and campaigns of all parties.

- This guidance is intended to assist programme makers, editors and the BBC as a whole to achieve fairness.

They apply to all BBC programmes and outlets. Programmes which do not usually cover political subjects or normally invite politicians to participate should consult the Chief Political Adviser before finalising any plans to do so.

1. Achieving Balance

Daily News magazine programmes (in the nations, regions and UK wide) must achieve an appropriate and fair balance in coverage of the main parties in the course of each week of the campaign.

As a working shorthand for the General Election Campaign we will take the main parties in England to be Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrats; In Scotland
these three plus the SNP, in Wales these three plus Plaid Cymru; in Northern Ireland the Ulster Unionists, the SDLP, the DUP and Sinn Fein.

Network programmes must ensure that SNP and/or Plaid Cymru are featured in a fair proportion of items on subjects on which they have distinctive policies. See also Section 5 on devolution.

- This means that each strand (e.g. a drive time show on radio) is responsible for reaching its own targets within the week and cannot rely on other outlets at different times of day (e.g. the breakfast show) to do so for it.

- Single programmes should avoid individual editions getting badly out of kilter. There may be days when inevitably one party dominates the news agenda e.g. when the main party manifestos are launched, but in that case care must be taken to ensure that coverage of similar prominence and duration is given to the other manifesto launches on the relevant days.

- Every edition of the multi-item programmes which cover the campaign e.g. the Regional 6.30 – 7.00 slot, should refer in at least one item to each of the main parties.

- News 24 and television and radio summaries will divide the 24 hour day into blocks and aim to achieve balance across a week in each one.

- Weekly programmes, or running series within daily sequence programmes, which focus on one party or another should trail both forwards and backwards so that it is clear to the audience that balance is built in over time.

- Particular care should be taken over coverage of high profile issues like Europe where there is a multi-faceted debate within and between the parties to ensure a balance of views is maintained.

2. Minor Parties

Minor parties embrace a wide range, from parties which have elected representatives in the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly, to those who have not stood before, or who have stood many times with little electoral success. Relevant factors to take into account in deciding how much coverage a party should get are significant levels of previous electoral support, evidence of current support and the number of candidates being fielded.

The following guidance is aimed at ensuring minimum coverage for all those parties. It does not set a maximum. There may well be regional variations in the relative strength of the minor parties and this ought to be reflected in the coverage.
• The manifesto launch of all parties who are standing in at least one sixth of the seats UK wide should be covered on BBC1, BBC2, R1, R2, R4, R5Live, & News 24, in all summaries in the hours following the launch, and with some reference to content in the main news programmes which follow (e.g: the 1, 6, or 10 on BBC1, WATO on R4, Drive on R5, the news belt on Newsnight on BBC2). BBC Parliament will also carry them.

• All daily news and current affairs network programmes should ensure that the policies of each of these parties are explained, and analysed, in at least one substantial item during the course of the campaign.

• All regional programmes in England which report the election should cover the manifesto launch of all parties who are standing in more than one sixth of the constituencies in that region. There should be at least one other substantive item on each of these parties during the campaign.

• All Programme Strands in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland which report the election should cover the manifesto launch and do at least one other substantive item in the course of the campaign, on all parties standing in one sixth of the seats in those nations. They should also include a contribution from these parties in some items on those subjects on which they have distinctive policies.

• The audience will be referred, as appropriate to the full list of parties standing on Ceefax, BBC News Online and/or the national and city sites.

3. Constituency reports

Section 93 of the RPA has been abolished but the BBC has a legal obligation to adopt a code of practice in its constituency coverage. All other broadcasters in the UK will adopt the same code.

The abolition of Section 93 of the RPA means that there is no legal distinction for us between the period before close of nominations and the period after it. It also means that candidates who withhold their consent from constituency reports or debates can no longer effectively exercise a veto over all other candidates.

However, this does not weaken in any way the BBC’s obligations to fairness. So when the election is called the following guidelines come into effect immediately.

• to be impartial, constituency reports or debates should give due weight to candidates of the main parties. This means that if any candidate takes part in an item about a specific constituency, then candidates of each of the main parties should be offered the opportunity to take part. As a working shorthand for the General Election Campaign we will take the main parties in England to be Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrats; in Scotland these three plus the SNP, in Wales these three plus Plaid Cymru; in Northern Ireland the Ulster Unionists, the SDLP, the DUP and Sinn Fein.
• to be authoritative, it is right to make some distinction in the weight of the contribution between these candidates and others. Constituency reports or debates should also include some participation from candidates representing parties with either previous significant electoral support (for example parties which have gained a few seats in other recent elections or individuals who have been elected before under another label) or parties with evidence of significant current support. Where a party or an individual is mounting a significant campaign in a particular region, this should be reflected appropriately in the coverage.

• to be comprehensive and fair, full-length constituency reports or debates should include a list of all candidates standing. If a constituency is being reported on several times on the same channel in a day, it may be enough to broadcast the full list once a day. Audiences should also be directed to the full list of candidates on Ceefax and Online.

• programmes may decide to use either candidates or party representatives. But if the candidate from one of the parties is invited to take part, the other participants should, where at all possible, also be candidates. In exceptional circumstances if a candidate is genuinely unavailable the opportunity may be offered instead to a suitable party representative from within the constituency (eg: party official, agent or Councillor) but it should be made clear to the audience that the missing candidate(s) was invited and why they were unable to take part. If a party declines to put forward any representative the item/programme will go ahead without them.

• advice as to which parties currently fall into which category can be sought from the Chief Political Adviser. We will take care to ensure that particularly in those cases where a particular constituency is featured often, we do not give undue prominence to any single candidate over time.

4. Use of Candidates in issue based programme packages

The abolition of Section 93 of the RPA also gives far greater freedom to programme makers to use candidates in issue pieces. Indeed, giving candidates of all parties a higher profile during the campaign was one of the key arguments used to secure the abolition of the RPA. National figures who are also candidates have always been able to appear as party representatives. Now, for the first time, regional television and local radio can use candidates far more freely to discuss local issues, but this in no way absolves us of our responsibility to be fair between the parties.

In order to achieve fairness across the board, when programmes decide to use a local candidate in a package or debate, the other participants should where at all possible, also be local candidates. But candidates do not have to be from the same constituency – they can come from different constituencies within a region. In local issue round-tables where all the participants are
candidates, references to eg: local hospitals, bypasses etc, which would have been difficult under the RPA, will now be allowed.

However, if a candidate is being interviewed as a national spokesperson, we should not allow them to gain an unfair advantage over their constituency opponents by making repeated plugs for their own constituency. This can best be achieved by politely advising them in advance of our policy on this, editing out such references if pre-recorded and swift intervention by the interviewer, if live.

Callers to phone-ins must still be checked to see if they are candidates. Before the abolition of the RPA this would have precluded them from appearing as such. Now they can be encouraged to contribute, but the audience must be clear that they are speaking not as ordinary members of the public but as contributors with a stated political agenda. Care must be taken that over time programmes are not giving undue preference to one candidate over another.

The aim of all these guidelines is to encourage vigorous debate and a higher profile to candidates of all parties in general without giving unfair advantage to one candidate over another.

5. Devolution

This is the first UK General Election since Devolution. In Scotland, the Scottish Parliament, not Westminster, is now in charge of most domestic matters such as education, health and criminal law, most aspects of home affairs and the environment. In Northern Ireland the Assembly is in charge of education, health, and social services, agriculture, environment, urban and regional development. In Wales the National Assembly is in charge of education, agriculture and health.

- It is essential to make clear to the audience which issues will be influenced by the outcome of the election in each part of the UK. The BBC should be frank with its’ audience about the changed nature of the campaign in the nations. Indeed it may be newsworthy to raise this as an issue.

- However, it is unrealistic to expect that candidates and parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will confine themselves strictly to matters reserved to Westminster, such as defence, foreign affairs, the macro economy and social security and there is no indication at this stage that the UK General Election will be less keenly fought in the Nations. The contest will be a mixed blend: partly Westminster issues, partly a plebiscite on the performance of the parties in the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly. Programmes should reflect that blend to our audience, while making clear who does what in the new political set-up.

- The Scottish Parliament, National Assembly of Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly may well be in session during the UK General Election campaign, though they are unlikely to sit on polling day itself. All relevant programmes will continue to cover these proceedings on news merit, but the
guidelines on balance on the main parties, and other parties with elected representatives in those bodies will apply.

• Civil Servants in the devolved institutions will continue to process policy decisions and announcements during the UK election. We will report such announcements on news merit, but all four of the main parties in each nation should be given the opportunity to comment on them.

• Network programmes, in order to report fully the UK to the UK, should ensure that they cover the key election stories in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. In doing so the guidance on party balance in those nations must be followed.

6. Online

This is the first online general election.

• All editorial content must comply with the same guidelines on balance, use of candidates etc. which apply to television and radio programmes and monitoring should be carried out on the same basis as for programmes.

• BBC News Online, the Nations’ and English regions’ sites (in close liaison with each other to ensure a consistent BBC wide approach) will publish a complete list of candidates by constituency. Programmes will refer to this list as a matter of course at the end of full constituency reports.

• BBC News Online and Regional sites will list links to any party site, provided that it does not give strong grounds for concern that this breaches the BBC taste and decency guidelines or the law e.g. defamation or incitement to racial hatred.

• We will not link to the sites of individual candidates, unless there is a very strong editorial justification on news grounds and then only for a limited period (e.g. because major player publishes policy on his/her website which contradicts manifesto on their party’s website).

• Any speeches which are carried in full will be selected on news value, bearing in mind the need for balance between the parties.

• Forums and message boards: Care must be taken to ensure that forums and message boards are vehicles for lively debate and not hi-jacked by organised campaigns of one particular group or party. This is not easy to achieve but we are more likely to succeed if:

    Open ended message boards on political issues are avoided during the campaign. Hosts will be required to initiate topics with appropriate questions and to steer threads so as to encourage effective debate about the issues.
The topics are set by journalists and are based on the issues not personalities. Sites which do not usually engage in political issues should seek the advice of the Chief Political Adviser before doing so.

Poll type questions which attempt to quantify support for a party, politician, or policy issue should be avoided.

Pre-moderation or hourly postmoderation (e.g. in the case of Nations, the English Regions and Radio sites) will check that messages are not completely stacked in the direction of one party or another. The maximum time any message may be up before being checked on a postmoderated board is one hour. But this should not be taken as the acceptable norm. It may be necessary to check more frequently.

All moderators and hosts should know how to use BBC Online’s escalation strategy where appropriate, to protect a postmoderated message board from e.g. nuisance or abuse. For example, they should know how to switch a board from postmoderation into premoderation, at short notice. This will ensure that if necessary an organised campaign can be blocked.

Revised rules to effect this policy and make it transparent to all users, will be posted on all BBC message boards at the beginning of the election campaign.

- Journalists and moderators will have to make fine judgements between remarks that constitute robust political debate and personal abuse. The rule of thumb should be if we would not broadcast it on radio or TV, it should not be online. Filters for taste and decency and personal abuse will operate as usual but they should not be relied on as a substitute for effective moderation.

- Any live chat or online audio or video interviews by politicians should be subject to the same criteria on balance and fairness as applies to radio and TV interviews. The criteria are set out in these guidelines.

7. **Audience Programmes**

All programmes planning live audiences should consult the Chief Political Adviser to discuss how they plan to select the audience and to achieve an appropriate balance. All such procedures must stand up to public scrutiny.

8. **Party Leader Interviews**

In order to ensure that our audiences are served as well as possible during the campaign by a balanced package of robust interviews across a range of outlets, bids will be co-ordinated well in advance of the election so that a coherent and realistic BBC proposition is put to the party leaders.

With the exception of newsgathering interviews gathered on news value on the day, all bids for party leader interviews must be referred to the Chief Political
Adviser before parties are approached. Unsolicited offers should not be accepted without consultation with senior managers and a reference to the Chief Political Adviser.

9. **Opinion Polls**

During the campaign our policy takes into account three key factors:

- that 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; and

- 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, the rules about reporting polls (chapter 35 of Producers’ Guidelines) need to be scrupulously followed. They are:

- not to lead a news bulletin or programme simply with the results of a voting intention poll;

- not to 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;

- not to 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;

- to 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;

- not to use language which gives greater credibility to the polls than they deserve: polls “suggest” but never “prove” or even “show”;

- to 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;

- to report the organisation which carried out the poll and the organisation or publication which commissioned it.
In addition, during the campaign the BBC 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;

- Take particular care with newspaper reviews. Polls should not be the lead item in a newspaper review and should always be reported with a sentence of context (e.g. “that’s rather out of line with other polls this week”).

The Producers’ Guidelines make it clear that 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. For this reason we will not commission voting intention polls in any medium during the election campaign. 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.

10. **Vox Pops**

The value of Vox pop 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 one side of an argument, not an indication of the weight of opinion on either side of it. It follows that special care must be taken with vox pops during an election campaign to edit them in such a way as to ensure different sides of the issue are covered.

11. **E-mails**

The same principle applies to any e-mails we broadcast. E-mails offer immediacy and interactivity to many programmes but they too are an expression of opinion, not an indication of the weight of opinion on one side or the other of a question. What matters is the balance of what we broadcast, not the balance of those we receive.

Programme makers should be particularly alert during an election campaign to organised e-mail campaigns by parties and pressure groups. During this period they should ask e-mail contributors to include their address and telephone number so that checks can be run if necessary, if mass mailings are suspected.