



EUROPEAN  
MOVEMENT

# **Insular by Default?**

## **How the BBC presents Europe to the British Public**

*by Martyn Bond*

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Martyn Bond began his career in the BBC in 1966 producing programmes for the external services in Bush House. He subsequently taught European Studies in the New University of Ulster before joining the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers in Brussels in the Press Office in 1974. He was BBC correspondent in Berlin from 1981 to 1983, returning to Brussels late that year to work on overseas aid issues in the Council of Ministers and on relations with the European Parliament. From 1989 to 2000 he headed the European Parliament Office in the UK. From 2000 to 2003 he was Director of the Federal Trust, where he is now special advisor on EU Enlargement. He pursues his journalistic interest as a freelance and is a Director of the London Press Club.

At intervals through this paper some passages are printed in **bold type** and others in *italics*. Those passages in bold type are key suggestions for action or reflection by the BBC in order to improve the current situation. Those in italics are suggestions for action by European Movement members either individually or in their branches throughout the country.

# Insular by Default?

## How the BBC presents Europe to the British Public

At the end of 2004 the BBC Governors commissioned an inquiry into BBC news coverage of European affairs on domestic radio and television. Early in 2005 they received the report of the independent inquiry, the first review to be conducted by a panel drawn entirely from outside the BBC Management and the first to be published in full. The report presents a disturbing insight into the mismatch between what actually happens in Europe and what we - the viewers and listeners in the UK - learn about it.

The inquiry stated that the BBC must make its coverage of Europe "more demonstrably impartial", adding that there was a "widespread perception" of "certain forms of cultural and unintentional bias" which had to be corrected. While the inquiry found no evidence of intentional bias in favour of either a Europhile or a Europhobe position, it underlined that "the problem of ignorance among BBC journalists on the EU issue must be addressed as a matter of urgency".

The inquiry said it found an "institutional mindset" at the BBC when it came to the EU and a tendency to "polarise and over-simplify issues". It noted that there was a "failure to report issues which ought to be reported, perhaps out of a belief that they are not sufficiently entertaining" and concluded: "The BBC should devote more resources to training programme makers and researchers so that they better understand the EU".

In response to this unflattering report the BBC set up an internal working group chaired by the Director of BBC News. After consideration by the Governors, the recommendations of the working group are to be implemented during the course of this year, since external developments make the matter urgent. The UK takes over the Presidency of the Council of Ministers for six months from July 2005, and some time in 2006 we shall be given an opportunity to vote in the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty. The BBC has not got long to change its approach as far as European affairs are concerned, and live up to its mantra of informing and educating as well as entertaining the public.

The independent inquiry put it in a nutshell: "The BBC successfully engages audiences on complex US and Middle Eastern political issues. If it can do it in these areas - if for instance it can explain the concept of the hanging chad or the voting system in Ohio to the British electorate - we believe it can do the same for the EU."

## What the BBC does already

The BBC's current policy and practice is to deal with European affairs within mainstream programming. European issues are dealt with in a variety of programmes alongside other items, whether in news and current affairs or in general and cultural programming. With the exception of a short *Euronews* slot each weekday morning on 5 Live, the BBC has no programme slot dedicated specifically to European affairs in its domestic broadcasting schedules. In fact it has discontinued specific slots which at some stage in the past did deal exclusively with European issues, such as the popular and informative Radio 4 analysis entitled *Eurofile* which was dropped several years ago.

"Mainstreaming" reflects a deliberate choice by the BBC, which appreciates that European political issues cut across many domestic concerns. By mainstreaming European issues with a mention from time to time in the *Today Programme*, *Woman's Hour* or *You and Yours*, in *Question Time* or *Newsnight*, a larger audience - it is argued - stands to gain a better understanding than if the subject were placed in the "ghetto" of a specific European slot which would inevitably attract fewer viewers or listeners.

This argument appears reasonable from a broadcaster's point of view, but it ignores the effect it has - or does not have - on the audience. Opinion polls frequently reflect the British public's widespread ignorance of European issues. The British public is less well informed than the public in many continental countries. What is more, it knows it does not know much about Europe.

Eurobarometer reports - the public opinion polling conducted regularly by the European Commission across the whole EU - have consistently shown that the level of interest in the UK towards EU affairs is the lowest in the whole Union. One of the primary causes of this lack of interest is a basic lack of knowledge of EU affairs. This has earned the UK the nickname of the "don't know, don't care" capital of Europe. This fundamental lack of knowledge and lack of interest also combine to generate high levels of distrust in EU institutions such as the European Commission and the European Parliament. Over 30% of those polled in the UK with the least formal education (leaving school at sixteen) said they had never heard of the European Commission. The average for the broader sample across all levels of education was 25%, but even among those educated to age twenty or more the figure was 8%.

The BBC must share part of the blame for this lamentable state of affairs. Opinion polls show that a growing number of UK citizens - now 42% - feel there is too little media coverage of the European Union, while only 13% feel there is too much. And 27% think that what coverage there is in the UK media presents "too negative" a picture of EU affairs - double the number on average that think that is the case in other countries in the Union.

**The argument in favour of mainstreaming would carry more weight if the expected positive result - a better informed public - had by now been achieved. But, as shown above, this better understanding of European affairs by the general public is not reflected in opinion polls. Faced with the evidence, the BBC should draw the conclusion that the approach followed for many years has simply not worked. Current policy and practice need to be changed.**

## What should the BBC do about it?

The BBC enjoys a high level of trust in the general public of the UK. According to Eurobarometer polls, 59% of the public trust radio and 54% trust television, figures which contrast sharply with the 20% who trust the press. The BBC could impact strongly on the public's awareness of European affairs and knowledge of the EU if it made a conscious effort to do so.

From time to time the BBC does schedule programmes which have Europe as their main theme, but they are not regular fixtures in the programme schedules. We can all remember an edition of *Panorama* or *Newsnight* largely devoted to a European issue, a European Council meeting, for instance, that was 'big' in the news. Or we may recall human interest stories, such as *Crossing Frontiers*, a short series in which a presenter went on a journey through most of the new accession states in 2003/4.

But such examples are not part of a more general policy to create regular "European programmes" in the schedules. They remain selective "one offs" - however many there are - which are interesting examples in their own right, but do not amount to a consistent strand of broadcasting about Europe.

**The BBC should consider adding to its TV and radio schedules one or more programmes regularly dealing with European affairs as their main content. That way there would be more chance of viewers and listeners coming across European programmes and learning more about Europe.**

This would not detract from the existing policy of mainstreaming but would supplement it. It would allow for consistent follow-up of issues which occasional programmes cannot do, and it would create areas of expertise within the BBC where other programme makers could learn more about issues they might subsequently deal with in other programmes.

**The BBC should schedule more programmes dealing specifically with European affairs but not reduce the "mainstreaming" of European items in general programmes. This would increase overall coverage of the subject and go some way to rectify the acknowledged ignorance of the public about European affairs.**

## News and Current Affairs

In *About BBC News*, a public statement concerning editorial policy in its news programmes, the BBC claims to “aim to report what matters in the UK and around the world.” What matters here is clearly “what matters”, and the culture of the newsroom is central to deciding this - the news agenda - at any time. Priorities in this area often change, interpreted by those gatekeepers whose daily job it is to select and prepare items for broadcasting. There clearly are fashionable and unfashionable items. During the American elections, for instance, we had close to saturation coverage from the United States. Then the caravan moved on, and we subsequently had extensive coverage of the Tsunami disaster. The caravan moved on again and we had extensive coverage of the elections in Iraq. Now the caravan has moved on again. The journey is always interesting, but after a brief and intensive exposure to endlessly changing subjects, we then hear or see little or nothing more relating to it. We remain ignorant about what is happening after the subject drops out of the news agenda.

**Europe is too central to our political, economic and cultural life in Britain to suffer the same fate. The BBC should ensure that there is continuing coverage of European affairs, independent of the changing fashions of the newsroom.**

The UK's relationship with Europe has bedevilled each of the major political parties in this country in turn for over forty years. In a long term perspective it represents the political inheritance of succeeding generations after the Second World War, and more recently the challenge issued by the collapse of Communism and the end of the Cold War. It embodies the main options of British foreign policy, determining our major alliances and impinging on our sense of our own identity. It increasingly impacts on the daily life of citizens through legislation relating to the Single Market.

The divisive potential of Europe as a political issue has been reflected in disputes at the highest levels within British politics, as witness the opposition between Harold Wilson and Tony Benn, between Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher, and now between the position of HMG and that of the official Opposition. But even within the governing Labour Party there are divisions between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor (notably on the Euro), and comparable divisions can also be found within the upper reaches of the Conservative opposition.

The break-away of the Gang of Four and the formation of the Social Democratic Party in the 1980s was in large part due to disagreement with the Labour leadership about European policy. The subsequent emergence of the Liberal Democrats as a stronger force within the country and also at Westminster reflects in part their consistently pro-European position. Similarly, the recent success of the UK Independence Party at the latest European elections reflects public support for their clearly anti-European position.

Despite this background, some editors argue that European stories are not interesting enough to win through in the struggle for attention in news bulletins and current affairs programmes which inevitably have to be selective in what they report. To get into the news agenda, stories have to jump through two or three hoops before the public has an opportunity to see or hear them on the BBC. First they have to be adequately interesting for them to register with journalists in the News Gathering operation of the BBC. European stories have to register specifically among the priorities of World News (Foreign) - yes, “Foreign”, even though European issues are intimately bound up with our own domestic political life and economic well-being. Then they have to be ‘sold’ by those journalists following the stories to the various Output Editors on different news programmes. These Output Editors are the ultimate gatekeepers in the news process, determining both the content of news bulletins and the running order of items as well.

World News (Foreign) clearly fights its corner in the larger BBC News Gathering machine. It discovers and pursues a large number of European stories. The Brussels Office of the BBC, in particular, has been well staffed with experienced leadership over several years and has risen to the challenge of building expertise on the activities of the EU institutions as well as covering stories of general interest across the continent.

It is an irony that people living abroad are better informed by the BBC about European issues than people living in the UK. British people living or visiting abroad often report that BBC World and the World Service deal with European issues more regularly and in a more informed and informative manner than much domestic programming. Likewise, people who consult the BBC website have access to a considerable amount of information about European issues, presented in an accessible and interesting manner. Much domestic broadcasting about Europe seems to ignore the wealth of information available elsewhere in the Corporation.

**The main difficulty lies with the final gatekeepers, the Output Editors on news programmes, for whom European stories often register too low on their scale of priorities for inclusion in bulletins. News originating from the USA, the Middle East or Northern Ireland can easily appear more significant to them than news originating from the continent. Their “default position” seems to be almost anything rather than a European story.**

In its public statement *About BBC News* the Corporation underlines that “No matter the audience, our journalism tries to lay out why a story is significant - or at least in what way a story is new.” The BBC claims that it sets stories in context, but the difficulty for broadcasters - and in particular for gatekeepers - grappling with European affairs is to determine just what is “significant”. **Here, often through no fault of their own, they have had little opportunity to acquire the background that would enable them to understand the context and to determine more justly the significance of European news items.**

On occasion even Tony Blair and senior ministers have had difficulty in getting into the news bulletins when engaged on European business. At the Lisbon Summit which launched a British-inspired agenda for the European Union in Spring 2000, the PM's initiative was not included in the evening news bulletins. Only the speedy intervention of Alistair Campbell, No. 10's Director of Communications, with calls at a senior level in the BBC ensured that the story featured in news bulletins the following day. And Peter Hain, when Minister for Europe, was accompanied by a TV crew and a senior correspondent for a whole day during the European Convention which drafted the Constitution, with a view to contributing an item to the evening News. Despite the expense and preparation, the item was dropped from a planned slot that evening, pushed out by "more interesting" domestic political news from Westminster.

### **The Westminster perspective on political affairs**

The BBC devotes considerable resources to the task of broadcasting about national political issues. Westminster, Whitehall and Downing Street are seen as the bread and butter of political reporting, and that forms a major part of news bulletins.

Westminster reporters and correspondents know the personalities and the issues, sometimes in overwhelming detail, and rehearse them daily both on television and radio. This strong metropolitan emphasis, you could argue, tends to unbalance the "fair and informed debate at local, regional and national levels" to which the BBC is committed. It also distorts the reporting of European issues.

By strengthening regional and local broadcasting in recent years the BBC has made efforts to correct this imbalance. Newsrooms up and down the country are interested in regional political material which may well not get into national bulletins but which is of interest locally. Some MPs make news - and a name for themselves - through media outlets in their constituencies while they may remain unknown to a national audience.

Similarly, MEPs are often more interested in ensuring coverage in their regions than at national level. Local news editors in the BBC are well aware of this and make good use of such European sources. Many MEPs comment that they may well be asked to broadcast in their region while they are neglected nationally. When the European Parliament is in plenary session regional radio outlets in particular keep reporters in Strasbourg busy supplying material for their programmes.

Despite the best efforts of regional programmes to redress the balance, the Westminster perspective clearly does distort coverage of European affairs on national TV and radio. With the best will in the world, political correspondents whose main focus of attention is Westminster and/or Whitehall are not in a position to pursue European stories and present them in context. They may well be able to add the UK angle on a European story: that is certainly necessary, but it is seldom if ever sufficient.

Many of the UK interests which used to be aggregated at a national political level in Westminster are now fed into a complex system which arbitrates at European level between member states, the Institutions of the EU, international organisations and third countries. **A reporter based at Westminster whose main focus is on domestic politics is in a weak position to reflect the context of stories originating in Brussels or, indeed, in another member state. Yet such is the Westminster reflex that it is to the domestic correspondents that programme editors often look first for interpretation of political stories, even when they essentially concern European affairs.**

BBC management is aware of this problem and in the past has ensured that experienced Westminster correspondents have been subsequently appointed to Brussels, making Brussels in some way an annex of Westminster. They carry with them to Brussels and to their coverage of European affairs the goodwill of editors to whom they have been contributing material from Westminster, and such a policy is a useful way of trying to bridge the gap. But an enlightened personnel policy is not enough.

**The BBC needs to address this issue in a more systematic fashion through wider understanding of European affairs by larger numbers of programme makers, achieving this through revised producer guidelines and enhanced staff training.**

*The automatic reflex of looking to Westminster needs to be challenged by alert and informed editors. European Movement members should comment to the BBC when they feel an issue has been misrepresented because of this Westminster reflex.*

### **Guidelines for Producers**

BBC producer guidelines for political programmes state under the heading "Political Impartiality" that the BBC Charter 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". Further they underline that the Charter 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."

Producers are encouraged to ensure that there is a fair balance of views in their programmes. Guidelines for producers in this field continue: "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." BBC producers are encouraged to strive for impartiality through the juxtaposition of opposing political views, through "balance".

This may suffice for certain domestic stories where there is a clear difference between the main political parties in the UK. But it is not enough to explain European affairs to the British audience. Europe is not only deeply divisive between parties but also cuts across opinion within parties. If the aim is to increase public understanding of a complex issue, then simply offering conflicting viewpoints can be counterproductive. For this reason broadcast debate on Europe on occasion produces more heat than light. Technical programme considerations - shortage of time, the attraction of strong 'personalities', the simplicity of extreme arguments - give explanations of context a very low priority. The independent inquiry pointed out this failure, noting a tendency for programme producers to "polarise and over-simplify issues".

**The BBC needs to rewrite Guidelines for Producers in the light of the more complex issues that European reporting raises. It should invite a wider variety of views about European issues onto its programmes, encouraging listeners and viewers to get beyond the simple confrontation of pro and anti views. The arguments are more complex and programmes need to reflect that.**

*European Movement members should write to the BBC when they feel a programme or an item on a programme has not done justice to a complex European issue.*

### **Where does the Government stand?**

The situation is not helped by the Government's reluctance to engage in an active European campaign. The Government is occasionally reluctant to field spokesmen for its position, thus encouraging broadcasters to choose representatives of extreme positions for their programmes. Failing to field a spokesman may save the government from having to engage in complex and sophisticated explanations, but it does nothing to promote wider public understanding of Europe. The Government's information strategy on European affairs attempts to present itself - by default - as the reasonable compromise in the middle of a spectrum with pro and anti sentiments presented as extremes.

Given that the Government is committed to winning a resounding "Yes" in the forthcoming referendum, this seems a remarkably short-sighted approach. If a positive endorsement is to lead to longer term certainty about Britain's future role in the world, it will have to be built on a basis of greater understanding of the benefits of Britain's place in the EU. These need to be explained and argued now, and repeated frequently before the time comes to vote on the referendum question. Despite the burden of the UK Presidency of the EU in 2005, the Government should engage strongly in the public debate and should start that campaign immediately.

### **In thrall to the tabloids?**

Broadcasters often follow up stories that break elsewhere, usually in the national press. The tabloids - especially mid-range newspapers such as the Daily Mail - certainly influence the presentation of news by the Government, and inevitably they also influence news and current affairs broadcasters on the BBC's domestic channels.

The BBC has avoided the worst of the "euromyths" which have been perpetrated by the popular press and documented by the UK Representation of the European Commission, but it has not escaped them entirely. While many newspapers are guilty of either inventing, grossly distorting or wilfully misinterpreting European stories, the BBC has generally taken care not to leap before it looks. Its reporters and editors clearly do try to check their facts, avoid invention and maintain standards of accuracy. But even while they avoid the worst pitfalls, they are not immune.

Despite the best efforts of some committed producers and journalists interested in European affairs, examples abound of accidental and sometimes elementary mistakes on air. The most conspicuous lapses feature on the *Today Programme*. It is in competition with the daily newspapers for setting the political agenda, and under time pressure every morning, presenting and commenting on daily news.

Elsewhere you can also find howlers from time to time. They range from a Brussels correspondent suggesting that a new Commissioner was appointed to "bat for Britain" (when he was in fact required to take an oath of independence from national interests) to uncertainty about the member states of the Union or when they joined. A correspondent who should have known better described José Manuel Barroso, the new President of the Commission, as a "dull bureaucrat of whom little is known", whereas, as a successful Prime Minister of Portugal, he is a skilled and practised communicator. A presenter on Radio 2 boldly announced at a broadcast ceremony in the early 1990s that Greece had just joined the EU as the twelfth member state. Recently the Commission Representation in London had cause to condemn *BBC Online* for repeating a story from *The Times* - a would-be amusing but erroneous story - about the classification of tea-bags as potential sources of foot and mouth disease.

Such mistakes broadcast on air damage the BBC's credibility, suggest a lack of knowledge among some broadcasters, and set back the cause of public enlightenment.

The BBC is very sensitive to complaints. The independent investigation into the coverage of Europe by the BBC was triggered by a wave of complaints orchestrated by europhobe organisations. Their aim was to try to have the BBC condemned as biased in favour of Europe, but the report back-fired on them. It found no evidence of intentional bias, but it did underline the widespread ignorance and the resulting uncertainty with which the BBC dealt with European affairs.

*European Movement members need to continue to monitor BBC output - and the local press - and report items that do not live up to high standards of accuracy in respect of reporting European issues. Considered comment sent to the programme concerned will help the Corporation move in the right direction, which involves training staff better in understanding European issues. Local branches should make contact with local broadcasters to see what help they can offer - background briefings, lists of speakers, platforms to discuss programmes - which may be relevant to their region.*

## **Coverage of Westminster and the European Parliament**

The national parliament at Westminster lays down the conditions under which sound and pictures may be transmitted by the BBC. The Corporation has set up a specific TV channel - *BBC Parliament* - to reflect parliamentary proceedings in both Houses to the public. The channel has a very small audience, as might be expected for such a specialist interest as day-to-day parliamentary proceedings, but through its transmissions pictures and words from the House of Commons and from the Lords are made available on the record for the general public. They can subsequently be clipped by more popular channels for use in other programmes.

The audio-visual divisions of the European Commission and the European Parliament provide sound and pictures of debates in the European Parliament in Strasbourg (and to a lesser extent Committee meetings in Brussels) free of charge to broadcasters through *Europe By Satellite (EBS)*. In addition the audio-visual divisions of the Commission and the Parliament offer technical support and free facilities for recording and editing interviews and studio discussions in Brussels and Strasbourg. The BBC makes very little use either of the EBS transmissions or of the facilities offered by the Commission and the European Parliament.

Compared to the comprehensive coverage of Westminster on its dedicated TV channel - and also on the regular Radio 4 slot *Today in Parliament* each weekday evening - coverage of the European Parliament by the BBC is negligible. *BBC Parliament* transmits a half hour programme weekly *Europolitique*, which offers brief interviews usually with UK MEPs as well as short 'packages' on three or four European topics. A series of half-hour round table discussions from Strasbourg with MEPs from various member states was discontinued some years ago.

**The discrepancy in BBC coverage of the two parliaments reflects the mismatch between understanding of the two political contexts - national and European - inside the BBC. The neglect of the European Parliament also does nothing to address the information deficit in British public opinion.**

**The BBC should urgently increase the very limited resources allocated to *BBC Parliament* and enlarge its remit to provide extensive coverage of the European Parliament at times when the Commons and Lords are not sitting.**

**In addition it should introduce a weekly programme on Radio 4 comparable to *Today in Parliament* which would reflect proceedings in the European Parliament.**

*European Movement members could ask the BBC why they cannot receive coverage of the European Parliament comparable to that of Westminster.*

## **Increasing use of European Expertise**

Under-representation of European as opposed to national political affairs is also apparent in the use of experts invited to broadcast on various programmes on mainstream domestic radio and television. Although the situation has improved somewhat over the last two years or so, flagship programmes such as *Any Questions* and *Question Time* still rarely invite an MEP to participate while two or three MPs can be expected on the panel every week.

There are 659 national MPs and 78 UK MEPs but flagship political editors seldom give MEPs "proportional representation" on their programmes. If such programmes widened their range of invitees to include MEPs more regularly - even on a rough and ready basis comparable to their numbers in relation to MPs - the BBC would go some way to making the audience more aware of our European legislators. The programmes in question might also in this way enhance the diversity of views that they offer the audience on UK domestic issues as well.

**Not only MEPs but also European civil servants and others with specific European expertise, both from the UK and across the continent, are seldom called on to comment on mainstream programmes, even when they deal with European issues. Producers have an in-built or acquired tendency to turn to national political commentators, who may be well known to the programme concerned but may not be particularly well equipped to comment on the question in hand or to give it the European context it may deserve. Revised producer guidelines could encourage them to look more widely for expertise, including continental sources.**

*European Movement members could encourage local broadcasters to cover events where their local MEPs or other well informed experts are appearing.*

## Covering elections, covering countries

The BBC gives extensive coverage to elections in the UK, whether they are general elections, European elections, elections to the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly or elections in Northern Ireland. The BBC also gave extensive coverage of the recent Presidential elections in the USA. But it pays considerably less attention to elections in our continental neighbours. It would be a mark of the BBC's greater European awareness if the *Today Programme* regularly set up in Paris (as it has done on occasion) or Berlin - or even Madrid, Rome or Warsaw - for national elections there. This should help to contextualise them politically for the large listening audience that it enjoys every morning.

The BBC did make a particular effort to cover the European Elections in June 2004, reflecting results from other countries in an *Election Night Special* programme.

Similarly, to mark the occasion of the recent Enlargement of the European Union the BBC devoted considerable extra resources both for news items and for longer programmes. Several reporters were sent to the countries in question and as a result made a number of interesting and informative programmes. *Breakfast TV* also ran a full week's explanation of EU affairs just before the December 2004 European Summit in Brussels.

These exercises proved that the BBC can shine an intense light on a specific European subject to good effect at the time. But what such programmes lacked - inevitably since the issues were dealt with in mainstream programming - was any follow up. The BBC would give greater proof of European engagement if it were to broadcast more consistently about Europe and the EU.

For instance, the results of general elections or political crises in the other member states of the EU may have a direct bearing on the political composition of the Council of Ministers in which our own government sits to legislate for us. They can also affect the overall balance of power within the European Institutions. Often difficult to grasp as a news event, this process of revisiting ongoing European stories is of potential importance and concern to the British public.

Enlargement is another example. As anyone concerned with European affairs is aware, such an event is not over and done with when the new member states take their seats in Brussels. Like many European issues, it needs to be revisited from time to time. Some policies, indeed some specific legislation may take years to come to fruition, and they need to be revisited as they progress.

Broadcasters on the continent give considerably more regular coverage to European affairs than does the BBC. News bulletins in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, for instance, often include items relating to neighbouring countries or to Europe-wide issues. This frequent, on-going exposure to European news in all probability contributes to the better understanding of Europe and European affairs that the publics in these countries demonstrate in opinion polls. Certainly the populations of these countries are better informed about the European Union and have a greater understanding of European affairs than the British public, and media coverage is likely to be a major factor in this.

## Exchanging cultural and other programmes

News alone does not make us informed citizens. There are many other dimensions to citizenship, and cultural awareness is a crucial factor in binding a people together. Interpreted in a wide sense, the notion of European citizenship includes an awareness of cultural concerns reflected through general broadcasting as much as through news and current affairs programmes on which the recent independent review largely concentrated.

Continental broadcasters are heavily involved in a number of exchanges and joint ventures - notably *Arte*, the Franco-German joint channel based in Strasbourg and *Circom*, the regional TV exchange network - which ensure that a strong European perspective is present in their cultural and general programming. The BBC, as a major exporter of programmes, appears reluctant to make use of these sources, possibly because doing so may well represent a net cost - or potential loss of revenue - to the Corporation. But in preparing a new policy towards European coverage in its domestic schedules the BBC should factor in this element and not disregard the potential these sources represent.

Continental audiences appear not to have any difficulty in appreciating dubbed or subtitled films, while the BBC overwhelmingly insists on English original language programmes. When it does buy programmes from abroad for broadcasting in the UK, it buys very largely from the USA. This clearly constrains the cultural understanding of viewers, favouring America and American values rather than the continent and European values. Viewers would benefit from a wider selection of programmes acquired through a more diversified acquisitions policy and a more dynamic involvement in exchange arrangements such as *Circom* and co-production possibilities with other stations such as *Arte*. The BBC's current practice in this area and the premises which underlie it need to be reviewed.

## **Biased, trivialised, marginalised?**

A great deal of devolved responsibility is given to programme producers and editors in the BBC. In such a context there can be no question of an intentional institutional bias for or against any particular policy since a very large number of editorial decisions are taken each day by a large number of programme-makers not subject to specific instructions on content from any central editorial desk.

Where a specific item or programme does appear to viewers or listeners to be biased, the BBC has mechanisms in place to register their response. The feed-back may be reflected on air if appropriate, and the programme maker concerned called on to correct errors. Listener and viewer phone-in programmes, reviews of the week's broadcasting and editorial discussions within relevant programme departments ensure that standards of accuracy are maintained and a fair and balanced range of views is presented over time to the audience.

*European Movement members can play a vital role here in actively monitoring programmes and commenting directly to the programme concerned about what they perceive as biased reporting.*

**Separate from the accusation of bias, however, is the suggestion that Europe as a subject is often trivialised or marginalised, treated more as entertainment than in an informative or educational manner. The scramble for higher ratings has undoubtedly led to a drive towards more entertainment, and this often involves some degree of trivialisation. In as far as this impacts on European affairs - through comedy shows taking easy shies at continental stereotypes, for instance - this is an issue the BBC could address.**

*European Movement members can also play a part here in monitoring general programming and complaining to the BBC if they feel programmes trivialise European issues.*

Often what is at stake is less a question of the BBC being biased or of trivialising a European issue in specific programmes than the Corporation failing to reflect the importance of Europe in its schedules. That is more the result of a widespread culture of insularity than of overt bias either towards a pro-European or an anti-European position among programme-makers.

**Even if public opinion were insular, that is no reason for the BBC simply to reflect it. The BBC has a responsibility both to its specific audiences and also to public opinion more generally to demonstrate leadership. On this issue, opinion polls show that the audience is in fact moving away from its traditionally insular position. It is increasingly hungry for reliable information about European affairs. That offers the Corporation a unique opportunity to both respond and to lead.**

The BBC Charter instructs the Corporation to "educate, inform and entertain" and it should be seen to be delivering on all three of these strands as far as European affairs are concerned.

*The European Movement should encourage it in this direction. European Movement members up and down the country can help it to do so.*



## European Movement Policy Papers

Policy Papers are published from time to time by the European Movement to stimulate debate, both within the European Movement and more broadly, on matters of current concern, with the objective of formulating clear proposals for action. The views expressed in European Movement Policy Papers are, however, solely those of their authors.

The European Movement (EM-UK) is an all-party, membership-based, non-governmental organisation with branches throughout the UK. It is part of a network of similar organisations across Europe, founded in 1948 at The Hague following a call by Sir Winston Churchill for increased co-operation and unity among European peoples and nations. EM-UK exists to put the case for constructive British engagement with Europe and to lead the debate on Britain's future role in Europe.



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