

House of Commons, Main Chamber

Adjournment debate on the governance of the BBC (Charles Walker, Con,
Broxbourne)

Thursday 8 December

Summary

- The BBC is a much loved institution and its services are enjoyed by millions of people at home and around the world.
- There is an increased interest in programmes about the countryside, but a **BBC Trust Review in 2014** found that *“The BBC could do a more accurate and comprehensive job with deeper expertise, with more coordination and collaboration across the BBC, and by reflecting a broader perspective on rural lives, rural issues and the part the countryside plays in national life”*.
- The new **Charter** requires the BBC *“to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom’s nations and regions”* and this must include rural communities to ensure that the BBC’s rural content accurately reflects rural life and the governance of the BBC must enforce this.
- There have been a number of occasions in the past 12 months when the BBC has failed to comply with, and enforce, its own editorial guidelines in respect of rural broadcasting and three case studies are provided below.
- The existing complaints procedure is failing to protect the interests of people in the countryside and we therefore welcome the plans to hand regulation powers to Ofcom as part of the new Charter.
- The need for impartiality and accuracy should be central to the governance of the BBC. Editorial standards need to be enforced to ensure that the new Charter is implemented in full.

CA policy position

- The Countryside Alliance welcomes the new Charter which enshrines the need for impartiality in BBC broadcasting for the first time and also includes a commitment *“to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom’s nations and regions”*.
- The Countryside Alliance welcomes the plans to hand regulation powers to Ofcom as part of the new Charter, and we would welcome a consultation on the new measures to be put in place.
- The Countryside Alliances calls for a clearer and more effective internal complaints procedure to ensure that editorial standards are enforced.
- The Countryside Alliance calls for a review of the recommendations made in the 2014 BBC Trust Review into rural broadcasting to ensure that these are being implemented in full.

Case Studies

1. Chris Packham

In September 2016 the Editorial Standards Committee of the BBC Trust published its Finding into a complaint that was made by the Countryside Alliance and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT). The complaint was in response to an article that was published by BBC presenter Chris Packham in the September 2015 edition of the BBC Wildlife Magazine in which he described everyone involved in lawful hunting, shooting and wildlife management as *“the nasty brigade”*. In another article Mr Packham described farmers involved in the Government’s badger cull trials as *“brutalist thugs, liars and frauds”*.

The Finding concluded that Mr Packham had not breached editorial guidelines despite the clear breach of the BBC's editorial guidelines and abuse of the position given to him as a BBC presenter being very clear. The BBC effectively rejected the complaint before it had been considered by stating in the media that Mr Packham was entitled to express views outside of his employment on BBC programmes.

The Finding ruled that *"the amount of time contracted and the amount of time on air did not make Mr Packham a 'regular' BBC Presenter"*, even though he worked for the BBC on 119 days, well over half the working year, in 2015. The BBC Trust also concluded that Mr Packham was not *"associated with public policy broadcasting"* because, for instance, an interview with campaigner George Monbiot about the future of farming in the uplands and rewilding was an 'academic', and not a 'policy' discussion, despite the clear public policy debate on rewilding currently taking place. There is no issue with people voicing such opinions, but using the position granted by a public service broadcaster to promote their personal agenda is a matter of great concern.

Since the complaint to the BBC, Chris Packham has continued to use his position as a BBC presenter to advance an anti-shooting agenda. He was listed as one of the supporters of a parliamentary petition to ban driven grouse shooting, and he is also supporting a new petition to ban the shooting of woodcock and other wading birds.

In response to the BBC Trust Finding, Countryside Alliance Chief Executive, Tim Bonner commented:

"The fact that the BBC Trust's whitewash is no surprise does not make it any less ridiculous. Claiming that Mr Packham is not a BBC presenter is utterly incredible. It shows how desperate the BBC was to exonerate its 'talent' that it could not come up with a better excuse.

This ruling sends out a message to Mr Packham, and any other BBC presenters who are so minded, that they are free to use the status awarded to them by their work for our publicly funded broadcaster to bully and abuse.

With this decision the Trust has done huge damage to the BBC's reputation in the countryside. During this lengthy complaints process Mr Packham has continued to use his position to attack rural interests and we will consider resubmitting a complaint to Ofcom when the Trust has been abolished".

Tim has written an article on BBC impartiality on the Conservative Home website, available [here](#).

2. BBC Inside-Out London

The Head of Shooting at the Countryside Alliance, Liam Stokes, was interviewed during an episode of BBC Inside-Out London on 31 October 2016 about the welfare of birds on gamebird farms and the growing popularity of game meat. The programme was clearly imbalanced and inaccurate. Following the programme being broadcast, the Countryside Alliance made a formal complaint to the BBC arguing that the BBC had failed to follow its own editorial guidelines.

It was argued that the BBC failed to follow its own guidelines in relation to its duty to provide balanced and impartial coverage on an important and controversial rural issue. It was also argued that the BBC failed to follow its own guidelines in relation to the decision to trespass on private land and property (during its investigations, BBC reporters trespassed on four different gamebird farms).

The BBC reporter failed to mention a Defra commissioned report that was published last year stating that the egg-laying methods looked at during the programme were *"a valid part of modern-day game production"*.

The response from the BBC to this complaint failed to address the serious concerns raised about the programme and the decision has been taken to pursue this further with the BBC Complaints Department.

In response to the programme, Countryside Alliance Chief Executive, Tim Bonner commented:

“The BBC clearly was only interested in airing the ‘documentary’ with maximum sensation for their urban viewers. The viewers of Inside-Out London have been given a flawed, unscientific and frankly ignorant impression of game farming. Meanwhile a legitimate sector of British farming has been smeared by the BBC, and only game farmers will suffer the consequences.

In the 14 years I have been dealing with BBC journalists this is the worst example of editorial practice I have experienced.

The BBC still has a, belated, opportunity to accept that there were major faults in the production of the Inside Out London documentary and repair at least some of the damage that it has caused. A failure to do that will only increase our concerns about the BBC’s attitude towards the rural community as a whole”.

Head of Shooting, Liam Stokes, has written an article about his appearance on the programme for the Spectator’s Coffee House blog, available [here](#).

3. BBC Inside-Out South West

A recent episode on Inside-Out South West included a feature on the badger cull with extensive interview clips with Jay Tierman, a high profile anti badger cull activist with a criminal record. In January 2015 Mr Tierman was found guilty of attempting to disrupt a cull, harassing officials from the National Farmers Union (NFU) and of failing to inform his supporters about the terms of an injunction. The Countryside Alliance made a formal complaint to the BBC following the broadcast of the programme on 3 October, and again on 5 October on Radio 4 Farming Today Programme.

Mr Tierman has become the face of the militant campaign to stop the badger the cull and his attempts at sabotage have left him with a criminal record for intimidating and harassing farmers. Despite the fact that he has vowed to continue his “*direct action*”, the BBC has given him air time twice in the week after the Government approved extension of the cull to seven new areas in England.

In response to the programme, Countryside Alliance Chief Executive, Tim Bonner commented:

“Jay Tierman is one of the most high profile, aggressive animal activists in the country.

Mr Tiernan was so happy about the positive platform provided by the BBC that he boasted about the coverage in a social media post.

The BBC travelling around with Jay Tiernan talking about his illegal activity is the equivalent of them driving around with a burglar talking about the houses he plans to burgle.”

Tim is quoted in an article in the Daily Telegraph about this, available [here](#).