

Chairman 14/11/86 on PPR:

[Friday]

J. Siéris La and Malcolm Macpherson - Series of letters
- no collective meeting of Governors.

- ① had to act as judge at jury ^{OR}
- ② i understand her at the time
- ③ unimpaired independence - "on west point"
- ④ make an objective report to the board
- ⑤ take over "PR - PPR point" - proper exchange
- ⑥ is justified ^{in terms of} "basic ^{subst.} & fully justified"
- ⑦

She is an comp. in the future.

Peacocks - clear.



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From:
THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PARTY
Rt. Hon. Norman Tebbit MP

11/14th November 1986

I have now had the opportunity fully to consider your response to the criticism, contained in my letter of 30th October, of the standards of balance and impartiality of BBC TV news coverage of the American raid on Libya.

It would have been comforting to the great mass of the public who would wish to be reassured about the standards of BBC news coverage had the BBC's claim that its reply was effective or even devastating proved to be well-founded. In my view that claim was wholly unsupported by your officials' paper which you sent me.

To ensure that my reaction did not reflect a prejudiced view of my own case I asked for an analysis of your defence from an independent non-political source. In fairness, I include the whole of that report which finds that significant points can be raised against my criticisms but on balance it finds as an irresistible conclusion that the main thrust of my complaints is fully justified.

I know that the Board of Governors is responsible for the maintenance of the high standards and impartiality for which we look to the BBC.

I hope that I have been misinformed, but I understand that the Board was not given a chance to meet and discuss my complaint collectively before your reply to me. If that is so it is a matter for regret.

However, I understand that at its meeting of 13th November the Board did discuss changes designed to ensure that the BBC would not lay itself open to fair criticism in future. If that is so it would be a matter for general satisfaction.

.../...

(2)

It is clear that further exchanges to reiterate allegations and denials would be pointless and unprofitable, and we might well agree that it would be best now to let the public judge these matters.

On the other hand, whilst I am anxious not to undermine the responsibility of the Board to uphold the Charter and License, I have the confidence to put my case to a mutually agreed person, or persons, who would make an objective report to be used as the basis of a collective discussion by the Board. You may feel that might be a constructive way forward.

To ensure that this letter does not become public before it reaches you I will delay its release to the press and place upon it an embargo until 1800 hours on Saturday, 15th November.

The Rt. Hon. Norman Tebbit, MP.

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cc. The Rt. Hon. Lord Barnett

CCO - BBC REPORTS - AN ANALYSIS

I

Mr Tebbit's letter of 30th October made two charges:

(i) that the BBC news was subjective and confrontational in style, inappropriately for a public broadcasting system;

(ii) that this style in practice led to mixing news with views, speculation, error, and hostile propaganda, and was thus unbalanced, unfair and partial.

The BBC letter of 5th November ignores the first charge (which Mr Tebbit had said was "the point I am making"), and hints at what the attached "BBC Response" then insists upon: that the BBC considers wholly unobjectionable its practice of colouring the news with strongly emotive sequences or juxtapositions and phrasing. The letter of 5th November claims that BBC news fully and fairly informed its public on the major issues and was neutral and unbiased.

On points of fact, the BBC Response scores several significant points against the CCO Document. But overall the Response fails. It is itself cheap and glib in many places. More important, it altogether fails to meet the substantial charge: that the ordering of themes, stories, paragraphs and sentences, and the colouring of the language, can and did turn even a broadcast which makes no untrue statements into a slanted, confrontational and fundamentally political or "editorialising" prise de position or taking a line.

The BBC Response scores significant points against the CCO Document, as follows:

- BBC p.2 the CCO phrase "never substantiated" is very vulnerable to the BBC reply. The CCO would have been well advised to mention Simpson's report. Had it done so, it might have commented that Simpson made no effort to evaluate the depth and weight of the "condemnations" by European and Arab powers, as he had sensibly done in relation to the USSR's. The weight he gave to the Arab League was, I believe, inappropriate (and the BBC's reply to this charge, on p.16, seems disingenuous) for it is well known that the League's "representation" of the Arab states is more verbal and nominal than real.
- BBC p.3 "only in the last breath" was an injudicious CCO phrase. CCO chose not to make a point which I think is valid: that the headline about "proof of Arab terrorism" was not really favourable to the Prime Minister. As the later parts of the broadcast stressed very effectively (Doc 1A pp. 10A and 14A, quoting Messrs. Foot and Steel), the issue was not whether the Libyans are proven terrorists but whether the US raid was legitimate and prudent self-defence aimed narrowly at terrorists. The view that it was found no place in the headline and rather little, vaguely stated, and late place in the whole broadcast.
- BBC p.7 "designed" was an inappropriate and vulnerable CCO word.
- BBC p.8 it is unfortunate that the CCO failed at its p.8 to make clear that it was still talking only about the introductory section of the broadcast. The BBC Response is thus able to do (at the top of p.8) what it does throughout: point to the statement somewhere in its broadcast and ignore the order, shape and tone of the broadcast as a whole.
- BBC p.9 "buried late in the newscast" was ill-advised.
- BBC p.10 "the only countries it actually quotes are the Soviet Union..." was ill-advised CCO phrasing, true only in a narrow sense of "actually quotes".
- BBC p.11 "unable ... to provide any real evidence... failed to show any evidence" (CCO p.9) is loose and vulnerable phrasing. Thus again the BBC Response scores a point which the CCO could be said not to have deserved to be able to make.

BBC p.21 It is true that the BBC's quotation of the Prime Minister is much more potent and favourable to the Government than the ITN quotation from the Foreign Secretary.

III

The BBC Response is meretricious in many points. Some examples:

- p.2 "Not true" refers in fact only to the last five words of the CCO statement quoted (and misspelt). The Response ignores the main CCO point: that "worldwide condemnation" is a subjective and emotive description (and, one may add, mere journalese, repeated by at least two other similarly slack uses of "world") in its application to the complex reality, that some substantial nations clearly supported the US and that much of the condemnation by others was muted, pro forma or obviously expedient.
- p.3 "CCO chooses not to draw attention to the fact that ITN..." Debating point; the CCO paragraph on ITN headlines clearly deals with them in consecutive order.
- p.4 (a) "Not true. Not one of the BBC's headlines was conjectural". The CCO was contrasting hard fact not merely or, here, primarily with conjecture but with the presentation, by selection and colouring, of the anti-American action case described (very well) on pp.3-4 and 15 of the CCO Document.
- p.4 (d) "Not true". Here the Response is ignoring the charge, which is that the introduction was unbalanced as an introduction.
- p.5 last para, the accusation of CCO tendentiousness is itself a tendentious reading of the CCO charge.
- p.7 second response is all froth and flannel.
- p.12 the BBC itemisation of times of the film reports seems a wretched quibble. Moreover, the CCO had no need to present "evidence" for its assertion that the ITN report from Tripoli was more factual; a reading of the two reports makes it evident.
- p.13 Again, the timing of film coverage is no proper response to a charge which expressly related to "the whole [BBC] report". The separation of "casualties" from, eg. "interview with doctor" and "pieces to camera" seems misleading.

- p.15 "there was no restriction on her words" seems very unlikely to be true except in a limited, quibbling sense; p.12 makes it clear that Ms Adie must always have been very conscious that her words were subject to censorship, even if in the event she was able to choose words which, with the aid of her engineer's bluff and fortitude, managed to get by the extremely menacing censorship committee.
- p.16 "self-congratulation" is not a "plain statement of fact", but a severe moral comment on what could equally have been described as "national pride at willingness to take risky, unpopular but hopefully decisive action", or in many other more neutral ways.
- p.17 "Graves' first three points ... were proven correct during the next few days" is correct only if his sweeping statements and forebodings are read in an unnaturally restricted way which the tone of the whole broadcast discouraged.
- p.17 "an examination of the possible consequences of the Libyan bombing" is a tendentious description of a hectoring, dramatic evocation of forebodings which proved greatly exaggerated.
- p.18 "Nowhere were the words 'unjustified' or 'aggression' used by us except in quotation by others" - an ignominious and indeed absurd response to the CCO's (very able) identification of the thrust of the whole broadcast.
- p.24 In defence of "all the indications are that this is just the start of a campaign aimed at Britain and British targets", the response says "The British Ambassador in Beirut certainly thought so in his warning to Britons in Beirut". This is feeble; according to the Response itself, the Ambassador had warned Britons in West Beirut not to go into the streets "for a day or so" (p.23) - he thus seems not to have had before his imagination the image of an ascending scale of general attacks on British targets, evoked by the BBC's broadcast.
- p.24 "they were his words, not ours ... clearly newsworthy". Quite inadequate as a defence; every libeller knows how to use quotation. Mr Kinnock's words were indeed newsworthy, but to place them where they were placed gave to the entire broadcast an intense emotional cast - rather as the 15th April broadcast had confirmed its emotional message by ending with "Mrs Thatcher, blood on your hands" and "US murderers get out of Britain" (quoted from unspecified large numbers of unidentified demonstrators blocking Whitehall).

IV

Taken as a whole, and at almost every relevant point, the Response makes no serious attempt to rebut the principal CCO charge, which Mr Tebbit had described as his "point": that the subjective and confrontational style of the BBC news coverage rendered it no longer "objective" or "factual" "reporting" - that the weight of comment, speculation, erroneous inference, and coverage of hostile propaganda, was swamping or overbalancing the coverage of news and was in any event inappropriate for a public broadcasting system. I have mentioned in Section III many instances where the Response evades or misses this nub of the CCO case. I now mention some other instances:

- p.6 "jubilation"; the reply ignores the charge; the fact that the mood was jubilation is not questioned by CCO; the question is whether that fact - unqualified by any specification of what the jubilation was about (eg. that a difficult or bold mission had been accomplished with relatively few civilian casualties?) - did or did not deserve to be elevated to the place it was, and juxtaposed with the melancholy facts it was (and with non-facts such as that civilians were "targets").
- p.8 second BBC response, claiming neutrality of tone, is in my view unjustified.
- p.10 first response is unconvincing.
- p.20 both responses misleadingly downgrade the BBC's offence to "drawing the wrong inference" and "statement of fact".
- p.21 first response, affirms the BBC's approval of its style of vague, inflated, rhetorical or emotive presentation: "Britain paying the price" stands for two or three limited though murderous or criminal incidents in the world's most anarchic city, plus imaginary "Arab revenge" at Heathrow against an Israeli airliner in transit from the US.
- p.22 "one factual error" - but, again, the CCO charge was that the BBC's news-style inevitably results in the magnification of perhaps inculpable factual errors, by an editorialising stance which converts the whole broadcast into a reverberating chamber of mutually reinforcing emotional echoes from that error.

The whole BBC Response ignores the fact well-known to all who use words by trade: that it makes a difference how you present the same facts. For example:

- (i) Hardpressed by the nationwide outcry against its "news" presentation, the BBC today sought to defend itself in a self-congratulatory document ...
- (ii) In a hard-hitting point-by-point rebuttal, the BBC today answered anti-BBC campaigners ...
- (iii) The BBC today issued a detailed response to the many complaints which have suggested that its newscasts are biased ...

V

I conclude that, although the BBC were able to show that the CCO Document was significantly flawed, they were unable, and clearly unwilling, to rebut or even to confront the main CCO charges, which seem to me to have been substantially correct.

I must, however, observe that the second of those two charges, as I have stated them in I above, is considerably less precise than the first, and may be thought to have had undue prominence in Mr Tebbit's letter, relative to the charge which that letter itself went on to specify as its real point. The BBC's letter and Response focus on one aspect of that less precise charge, and on that selected terrain respond successfully.