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Helen Nice
Programme Complaints Committee, Acting Secretary
Room 211
35 Marylebone High Street
London
W1U 4AA

Your ref IM/12339a

9th June 2005

Dear Helen

I would like to appeal against a finding, made by Mr Fraser Steel, on a complaint I have submitted to the BBC.

This complaint was in two parts:

- (1) That the Radio 4 news coverage on the 5th and 8th November 2004 was completely misleading in that it explicitly stated that the North East referendum result was a 'defeat' for the government's Regionalisation programme when it was no such thing. It was solely a rejection of the concept of an elected assembly as opposed to the existing appointed assembly.
- (2) That the BBC had at no time covered the background to Regionalisation which is a direct result of a pan EU policy that has its roots in the administration of EU Structural Funding in the 1990's developed along the way via mechanisms such as the Maastricht treaty.

The second part has been ignored throughout the correspondence except to say that it was of 'too general a nature' to answer. Isn't this rather a poor way of avoiding accusations of bias?

As to the first part of the complaint, Mr Steel is just plain wrong and has not addressed my points. Please take a look at the correspondence. Mr Steel states that 'these were news stories specifically related to events on the days in question, and were clear about their subject matter'. But if you look at the transcripts that Mr Steel sent with his final letter the broadcast on the 5th does not mention 'elected assemblies' at all (apart from a quote from Michael Howard) and the one on the 8th only mentions them in connection with Mr Prescott's '20 year dream of elected regional assemblies' when Mr Prescott's 20 year dream was about Regionalisation not just the minor point of whether to have an elected or appointed assembly. If they had been 'clear' they would have said (a) what the referendum was about (i.e. No elected assembly) and (b) what the result meant (i.e. The appointed regional assembly would remain).

The transcripts just back up my points entirely. The first sentence of the 8th Nov transcript says 'the government is shelving plans for devolution in the English Regions..' This it just not true – something Mr Prescott made clear in his speech to the Commons that day. The shifting of powers from local and national government to the regions is proceeding unabated. It is only the plans for elected regional assemblies that have been shelved – they will continue to exist but just as unelected bodies.

The last sentence in the transcript from the 5th sums it all up and is a theme repeated by Mr Steel. '..they no longer believe regional assemblies will be create in the near future' - the fact is that Regional Assemblies already exist in **all** areas of Britain. There is no scope for having elections about 'further' assemblies – they are already there. This referendum was solely about making the existing, appointed assembly into an elected assembly something your broadcasts hide (perhaps deliberately? - lets face it, if a listener wanted to take the paranoid view that the BBC was a politically biased organisation that pushed a pro EU policy at every point you could not have done a better job. To completely bury the whole EU background to Regionalisation and then pretend that it was over anyway as a result of the North East referendum would have been the ideal way to handle it!).

Yours sincerely

Michael Wigley