



Editorial Complaints Unit

6 April 2005

**Our ref:
IM/12339**

Mr Michael Wigley
11 Saxholm Way
Southampton
S016 7HB

Dear Mr Wigley,

Six o'Clock News, Radio 4, 5 & 8 November 2004

Thank you for your letters in which you set out and clarified details of your complaint about the coverage of regional assemblies in these bulletins following the result of the referendum in the north-east. Let me first add to those you have already received my personal apology for the delay in getting this response to you. As my colleague has told you, initially a combination of circumstances led to a backlog of work for members of my team, and your letter was caught up in this. However, we have now had an opportunity to listen to the two bulletins in the light of your complaint and discuss your concerns with colleagues in BBC Radio News.

Turning first to the report by Terry Stiastry in the bulletin on 5 November, it seemed clear from our review that what she was reporting was not the impact of the north-east "No" vote on the future of existing regional assemblies (such as the one in the East of England). Rather she was concerned with the likely impact of the north-east result on the Government's plans for further referenda and therefore, by implication, on the creation of directly elected regional assemblies in the future, and also on individuals within the Government, in particular the Deputy Prime Minister. Ms Stiastry said:

It was a personal setback for the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, who called the result "an emphatic defeat".

Far from saying that the north-east result spelled the end of regional assemblies of any kind, the report was more of a situation update, reporting that the Government's initial response was cautious:

STIASTRY. The Local Government Minister, Nick Raynsford, wanted to look at what happened in the north-east before making any decision on holding votes elsewhere.

RA YNSFORD: We'll certainly reflect on what happened here in the north-east ... I don't want to make an instant decision on anything, frankly. There are important issues from yesterday's referendum. We need to consider them in the cold light of day rather than jumping over-rapidly to any precipitate conclusions.



Terry Stiastry further stressed the relatively narrow focus of the piece - the referendum question - when she went on to say:

The prospect of referendums in two other regions - the north-west, and Yorkshire and the Humber - is now a very distant one.

She went on to quote the reaction of the Leader of the Opposition, Michael Howard ("he was sure that the idea of English regional assemblies would now be dropped"), and to represent the views of those who continued to support the idea of devolved local government ("Some supporters of devolution to English regions believe voters weren't offered enough autonomy. But even they no longer believe that regional assemblies will be created in the near future. The insertion of a word such as "further" or "new" might have been useful here. But it seemed clear to me that the subject of the report was the prospects for future referenda and directly elected assemblies rather than the future (or the origins) of existing ones, such as that for the East of England, whose plans for housebuilding were the subject of Richard Black's report later in the bulletin.

By the time of James Hardy's report in the bulletin of 8 November, the Government's position had become clearer, as the headline at the top of the bulletin plainly indicated:

The Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, is shelving plans for any more referendums on regional assemblies.

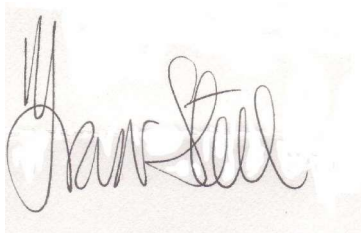
This piece was chiefly concerned with the impact of the north-east result and the decision which followed it on Mr Prescott himself. This was plain from James Hardy's opening sentence:

It was the day John Prescott must have dreaded - an appearance in the Commons to tell MPs that his twenty-year dream of elected regional assemblies was dead.

As with Terry Stiastry's report three days earlier, there was no suggestion that existing assemblies were under threat - only that new ones were now unlikely to be established. Indeed, I'd argue that the presence of Richard Black's report in the 5 November bulletin was very much an indication that it was business as usual for the existing bodies.

For these reasons, I don't feel that there are grounds for upholding your complaint on this occasion. Once again I'd like to apologise for the delay in getting this finding to you and to thank you for your patience. Thank you also for bringing your concern to our attention and giving me the opportunity to investigate it.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fraser Steel', written on a light-colored background.

Fraser Steel
Head of Editorial Complaints
FS/SJ