



Governance Unit

9 September 2005

Mr Michael Wigley  
11 Saxholm Way  
Southampton  
S016 7HB

Dear Mr Wigley,

**Six O'clock News, BBC Radio 4, 5 & 8 November 2004**

The Governors' Programme Complaints Committee, which I chair, has now considered your appeal. I enclose a copy of its decision, which will be included in the next edition of the quarterly bulletin "Programme Complaints: appeals to the Governors". As with all findings published in the bulletin, apart from those relating to appeals from people directly involved in a programme, your name is not mentioned in the finding

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Tait".

**Richard Tait**  
**Chairman**



# FINDING BY THE GOVERNORS' PROGRAMME COMPLAINTS COMMITTEE

## **SIX O'CLOCK NEWS**

**BBC Radio 4, 5 & 8 November 2004**

Appeal by Mr Wigley

### **(a) The programmes**

These complaints concerned the accuracy of BBC reporting of the North East Assembly referendum in November 2005, and associated allegations of apparent pro-European Union (EU) bias.

There were complaints concerning two reports on BBC Radio 4 News, on 5 and 8 November 2004.

### **(b) The complaints**

The complainant alleged that the BBC had "consistently and incorrectly" reported that the "no" referendum result spelled the end of regionalisation. In particular he argued that:

- The report on Friday 5 November stated that the "assembly" would not now be created but then, ten minutes later, reported that The 'East of England regional assembly' has authorised the building of half a million homes
- The report on Monday 8 November stated that John Prescott was announcing the end of the regionalisation programme when, in fact, he was just announcing that there would be no more referenda on elected assemblies.

More broadly, the complainant alleged that the BBC had totally failed to report or do any journalistic research into the claim that the regionalisation programme is, in fact, a result of EU legislation that has been forced onto the government." In particular that:

- The BBC has failed to report and/or investigate the claim by the 'no' campaigners that the regions are being foisted on us by EU legislation.
- The UK government plays down EU involvement in general, and the BBC appears to be adopting a pro-EU stance by failing to investigate these matters.

The Head of Programme Complaints investigated the complaints about the reports on 5 and 8 November, and did not uphold them. He noted that the broader complaint did not fall within the remit of the Editorial Complaints Unit (ECU), which was to investigate specific programme complaints.

The complainant appealed to the Governors' Programme Complaints

## Committee on the grounds that:

- The ECU Head of Complaints had failed to address the points made in the first element of the complaint.
- The ECU had failed to investigate the second element of his complaint.

### (c) The relevant programme standards

The Committee considered the relevant broadcast standards, including the specific BBC Producers' Guidelines which applied in particular:

#### Truth and Accuracy:

*We will always strive to establish the truth of what has happened as best we can. We aim for the highest possible levels of accuracy and precision of language. Our journalism will be well sourced, based on sound evidence, and thoroughly tested. It will rely on fact rather than opinion, and be set in context. We will be honest and open about what we don't know and avoid unfounded speculation.*

*Weighing the facts: Accuracy is often more than a question of getting the facts right. All the relevant facts and information should be weighed to get at the truth of what is reported or described. If an issue is controversial, relevant opinions as well as facts may need to be considered."*

#### Impartiality:

*Due impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC. It is a core value and no area of programming is exempt from it. All BBC programmes and services should show open-mindedness, fairness and a respect for truth.*

*We report the facts first. Understand and explain their context. Provide professional judgments where appropriate, but never promote our own personal opinions. Openness and independence of mind is at the heart of practising accuracy and impartiality. We will strive to be fair and open minded by reflecting all significant strands of opinion, and by exploring the range and conflict of views. Testing a wide range of views with the evidence is essential if we are to give our audiences the greatest possible opportunity to decide for themselves on the issues of the day.*

### (d) The Committee's decision

#### (i) 5 November report

The Committee concluded that the first report on 5 November (on the results of the referendum) had not made it sufficiently clear that the referendum concerned *elected assemblies*, rather than *assemblies per se*. For example, the Correspondent said that "Some supporters of devolution to English regions believe voters weren't offered enough autonomy, but even they no longer believe regional assemblies will be created in the near future." This

inaccuracy was thrown into sharp relief by the later item on the house-building plans of the East of England Assembly

The report therefore fell short of the BBC's editorial standards on accuracy and precision of language.

This element of the appeal was upheld.

### **(ii) 8 November report**

The Committee then considered the report of 8 November 2004. The complainant had alleged that the BBC reported that John Prescott was "announcing the end of the regionalisation programme," when in fact he was just announcing that there would be no more referenda on elected assemblies.

The Committee noted the following transcript of the item, particularly the phrase underlined below:

*NEWSREADER: 'The government is shelving plans for devolution in the English regions, in the light of last week's resounding No" vote in the referendum on an elected assembly for the North East. The Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, told the Commons that he would not be bringing forward orders for referendums in two other regions; the North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber. Reporting from Westminster, here's our political correspondent, James Hardy.'*

*HARDY.. 'It was the day John Prescott must have dreaded - an appearance in the Commons to tell MPs his twenty year dream of elected regional assemblies was dead. There was a face-saving vow to continue handing -greater powers to the region , but there was no ducking the central issue. The north east assembly had been decisively rejected he said and even if the government were to call votes in the North West and the Yorkshire and Humber regions they couldn't be held before September next year at the earliest:'*

The Committee considered that this report did make it sufficiently clear that the Deputy Prime Minister's announcement only concerned elected assemblies. This was in line with the requirements of the BBC Producers' Guidelines.

This element of the appeal was not upheld.

### **(iii) BBC coverage of the EU**

Finally the Committee considered the broader complaint about BBC coverage of the EU. The Committee agreed that this complaint did not fall within the remit of the ECU.

The Committee noted that the Board of Governors had recently commissioned an extensive impartiality review of BBC coverage of the European Union. The review was chaired by Lord Wilson. (Documentation available at

[www.bbcgovernors.co.uk](http://www.bbcgovernors.co.uk)). The report, together with the management response, has been sent to the complainant, since the Committee felt that it addressed the thrust of the complainant's concerns in detail.

For information, the Governors' most recent statement on the review (May 2005) is:

*We noted in January (2005) that the Independent Panel found no evidence of deliberate bias, but it concluded that the BBC's coverage of Europe needed to be improved. Furthermore, we noted that, on the evidence of the MORI research, the BBC was not succeeding in providing basic accessible information on the topic of Europe for licence fee payers and urgent action was needed . . . . . When we considered management's response, we as Governors concluded that the new measures outlined in the action plan would improve the quality of the BBC's Europe coverage. We were pleased in particular by the decision to appoint a Europe Editor and the renewed focus on training to improve BBC journalists' understanding of the complexities of Europe. In our discussions with management, we were encouraged by the new arrangements being implemented by the Director of News to involve programme editors in regular discussions about the BBC's coverage of Europe and the recognition of their important role in driving enthusiasm for improvement.*

In conclusion

The appeal was upheld in part.