

# **Review of the impartiality of BBC coverage of taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt.**

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## **1. Terms of Reference**

The full terms of reference are supplied as a PDF.

## **2. Context**

The Serota review can be found here:

<https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/reports/the-serota-review.pdf>

The BBC's action plan in response is here:

<https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/reports/impartiality-and-editorial-standards-action-plan.pdf>

## **3. Main terms used in this review**

We use 'fiscal policy' interchangeably with 'tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt.' We take this to include both the total levels of taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt and the detail of specific taxes, plus spending on specific services like health care, etc.

We use the term 'broad impartiality' not because we're trying to launch a new definition on the world, but simply to emphasise the wide-ranging, diverse sense of impartiality already present in the BBC's Editorial Guidelines and the BBC's 10-Point Impartiality Plan created in response to the Serota Review. We think this broad sense of impartiality – broad as in inclusive – needs to be continuously reasserted.

## **4. Scope: What this review includes**

As this could include most of what government does, we had to select a few examples in the hope they would lead us to some generalisable findings. On tax, we chose VAT and, for comparison, income tax, being two of the biggest, one direct, the other indirect. We were also aware that in Scotland and Wales income tax rates and thresholds may be varied. On spending, we chose health care, because it's big and always in the limelight; transport (because it often has a large capital element, though in the end we didn't look in detail at that); and penal policy – because we wondered if spending on this might be less popular and less visible.

Again, we noted that all three of these areas of spending include significant elements that are devolved to the UK Nations. On government borrowing and debt, we looked mainly at the stock of national debt. Even within these limited subject areas, we had to restrict the questions we asked to make the task manageable.

## **5. Things we didn't include or didn't do**

i) **Other areas.** It's worth noting how much that leaves out: spending on pensions and benefits, education, defence, social care, foreign aid, local government, inheritance tax, corporation tax, council tax, etc., etc.

ii) **Labelling.** We agreed to look at contributor affiliations but although some of our interviewees felt annoyed at how they're labelled, we didn't think the issues related specifically enough to fiscal policy, so we'd be overstepping our brief by giving a general opinion. But we wonder if the editorial guidelines could give more detail about which labels to use, whether they should be agreed by contributors, whether they should have a consistent political format, etc. Since labels need to be short, we feel that information about a contributor's economic perspective is best introduced during the interview, as relevant.

Potential conflicts of interest, however, can be especially relevant to tax and spending decisions, and we note concern about these – or rather concern when references to them are missing. A formal declaration of interest before every interview would be unwieldy, so we think it's best dealt with in the interview itself, but again we think Editorial Policy could consider that in the round.

iii) **Tone:** We were asked to consider the tone of interviews. On reflection, we again felt wary of trying to reach general conclusions about this through the lens of fiscal policy. The tone of interviews could be the subject of a limited, more general review, which would benefit from including political interviews, interviews of differing lengths, interviews conducted live and those pre-recorded to be edited prior to broadcast, for different outlets, etc. The subject of the interview seems to us only one of the factors likely to be relevant, and perhaps in this case not an especially significant one.

## 6. Methods of analysis

The terms of reference listed various suggested methodologies.

### **i) Content analysis.**

Analysing BBC output across all its platforms for a period long enough for us to be confident that we'd pick up the full range of political inflections, then to score these in some way that captured the subtleties of their political meaning or tone according to how left or right or otherwise biased they seemed, and then to add up these scores to give an overall judgement about which way the BBC leaned, seemed to us a Herculean piece of work, highly sensitive to individual judgment, statistically unreliable, and largely useless - as it's not at all clear how you would use such a judgement to change the detail of journalistic practice.

We took a different approach to content analysis. This was to use the BBC's Archive Search tool to sample a more manageable range of programmes on radio and tv, plus a selection of online articles, searching for keywords related to the focus of the review. The aim was not to try to add up bias, but to flag specific qualitative issues which it was conceivable could be addressed. That is, were there particular kinds of impartiality issue that came up often enough for us to suspect they were in some way systematic, not just a rare lapse of judgement. This was not going to produce a comprehensive list of every possible way the BBC might have a problem, and it was not going to produce a total score, though as we say, we doubted the wisdom of such an exercise anyway. But we did feel it would be capable of picking up the kind of recurrent or systematic issues most in need of attention. Even this was labour intensive, and meant looking at about 11,000 items, often in detail. So, for example, knowing that VAT was the largest tax for a substantial proportion of the adult population, we then searched references to VAT in BBC content. Most were of no significance, a glancing reference perhaps. The great majority of the remainder that we judged to be more than incidental either looked at VAT from a business perspective or were about fuel and energy. Just one addressed VAT as a subject of general interest to those on lower incomes. We then did a rough comparison with coverage of income tax and cross-referenced with what we heard in our interviews, both inside the BBC and out, and with the audience research, in which we noted a feeling that VAT was less salient in media coverage, but that audiences did feel its impact on prices. Because all the evidence was consistent, we concluded that VAT as an interest of those on low incomes seemed to be neglected.

We think this approach was valuable for the subject matter of this review. We'd caution the BBC from expecting too much in future, though, from content analysis using traditional methodologies.

We did not attempt to be exhaustive, as we say, but the programmes in our sample included:

TV:

BBC ONE:

Breakfast

BBC News at One

BBC News at Six

BBC News at Ten

BBC Weekend News

Newscast

Panorama

Question Time

Sunday Morning

The Andrew Marr Show

BBC TWO:

BBC News

Morning Live

Newsnight

Politics Live

BBC THREE

The Catch-Up

CBBC:

Newsround

Nations:

BBC Northern Ireland Evening News - Newsline

BBC Scotland Evening News - Reporting Scotland

BBC Scotland & BBC ONE Scotland - Debate Night

BBC Scotland - The Nine

BBC Wales Evening News - Wales Today

Nolan Live

News Channel:

BBC News

Outside Source

Regional News, including:

- BBC London, East Midlands Today, Look East, Look North, Midlands Today, North West Tonight, Points West, South East Today and South Today and Spotlight.
- Politics East, Politics London, Politics Midlands, Politics North, Politics North West, Politics South and Politics South West.

Radio became available on the BBC Archive Search in the latter part of the review. We sampled the following programmes:

BBC Radio 1:  
Newsbeat

BBC Radio 2:  
Jeremy Vine

BBC Radio 4:  
Analysis  
Any Questions?  
Budget Day 2021  
File on 4  
Money Box  
PM  
Six O'clock News  
The Backlog  
The Briefing Room  
The Westminster Hour  
The World at One  
Today

BBC Radio 5Live:  
Drive  
Nicky Campbell  
Wake Up to Money

We also looked at about 1,000 online items, and did a number of exploratory searches of everything that was available in archive, sampling at random.

In all, we looked at about 11,000 items across TV, Radio and Online, as we say, identifying about 1,000 for closer analysis.

## **ii) Interviews.**

We interviewed over 100 people, roughly half inside, half outside the BBC, often at length. We aimed for a variety of perspectives but there were some limitations. One was the subject matter. For example, plenty of people know about personal debt, but that is not national debt, to which very different considerations apply, and few want to talk about that in any detail and have the expertise. Nevertheless, we continued to try to reach as many points of view as we could – politically, professionally, geographically etc. – until we began to feel we had a reasonable sense of the waterfront. Some people declined or were unavailable, and this did leave gaps. Some political parties were more enthusiastic about taking part than others – we’re especially grateful to those that did. Given that public spending alone touches every area of government activity and large parts of the private sector, we could have gone on indefinitely – again, had we time. But diminishing returns are always likely to set in. We’d like to thank all our external interviewees for giving their own time and thoughts so generously. They were without exception constructive and reflective, and we learnt a great deal from them.

Internally, we also sought views from people in a range of positions covering a range of content. Again, we’d like to thank our internal interviewees for their extraordinarily thoughtful and open-minded responses to what were often challenging questions. They were, every one of them, simply eager to know if there was a way to do the job better.

A list of external interviewees is attached.

## **iii) Audience research.**

We regarded this as the counterpart to the specialist interviews. It was run by the market researchers, Jigsaw, who gathered diverse groups of audience panels from around the UK. This included seeking their reactions to stimulus material we had compiled. We don’t claim these panels were precisely representative, but again we felt the qualitative observations were useful. Jigsaw’s work produced one striking finding which we’ve discussed, but there was a good deal more. We decided to include their report in this appendix.

## **iv) Complaints.**

These are discussed briefly in the main report. There are very few that fall into the most serious category that relate specifically to fiscal policy. Although we felt one or two of these made reasonable points which we had also picked up elsewhere, they did not in our view reveal any other patterns – either of BBC assumptions or lines of approach.

#### **v) Survey of social media activity.**

We were invited to look for any express or revealed bias in social media use over the period. This entailed examining posts over the duration of the review period to see if they revealed bias over time. We were not asked to measure compliance with social media guidelines. We did not find revealed bias over time in the samples reviewed within the subject areas. However, as we've pointed out, BBC journalists sometimes share in haste perspectives from others who are commenting on Budgets and other main fiscal events which may, over time, raise impartiality issues the BBC should evaluate.

#### **vi) Innovative methods.**

The terms of reference also asked us to consider other 'innovative methods' such as an audience segmentation tool. We looked at a couple of these and while we feel they have their uses, it would have required another large investment to use them on a specific study of coverage of fiscal policy, for which we'd already commissioned one piece of audience research.

The most fruitful of the other methods we used was curiously simple – to gather a few rough measures of what was going on in people's lives that might matter to them, then compare that to how the BBC covered these things. So, we looked up who pays what tax for different income groups or in different places as a measure of people's tax interests, or who uses what means of transport as a measure of their travel interests, and then checked if these were reasonably reflected in the output. Of course, news generates interest for all sorts of reasons, not only 'is this something that affects me personally?' So we didn't expect to see perfect alignment. But we thought some of the misalignments were nevertheless big enough to raise questions whether coverage was sufficiently informed by what was going on out there, rather than mainly what other media and politics were already talking about. This evidence was consistent with what people told us in interviews. Coincidentally, one senior journalist and one outside economist both volunteered how useful it would be simply to have a few crib sheets about the make-up of the population. We think more important than a crib sheet is the instinct to seek out the information.

#### **vi) Methods we didn't use.**

Those were the methods we were either asked to use or added. There could have been others. For example, we could have looked at who's employed by the BBC and made comparisons with the UK population to see if it was representative. One external interviewee said the BBC would always miss business perspectives because so few journalists have a business background. We noted the 'we're a bunch of arts graduates' comment in the main review. But we didn't think we had much to add to this, and feel the BBC already knows that diversity – in all the ways you can slice it – is an issue, voices from business and different social and economic



groups included. We also note that it says it's now trying to do something about it.

We could also have compared the BBC with other UK media, or international media. An international comparison would be a substantial piece of work, too much for our limited review, we felt. Also, we weren't sure how useful these comparisons would be when the national contexts are often so different. We quoted the view of one journalist that UK media are already too influential on BBC journalism. In general, we felt that using other media as a benchmark for impartiality would be as likely to narrow perspectives as to broaden them, and likely to generate more heat than light – given that their own impartiality can of course be contested.

There are many potential ways of thinking about impartiality that might suggest different methods of analysis. In the end, we cut our cloth with those that seemed to help us understand the things people seemed to be most worried about, and which seemed to us most instructive.

## **7. Recent events**

When we started, people said fiscal policy was dull and asked why were we doing it. When we finished, it had led the bulletins for weeks and we were asked more than once if we could please consider these very exciting and crucial new events. Not in any detail, was the unfortunate answer. Not without redoing most of the interviews and perhaps much of the audience research and picking a new period for the content review – that is, re-running almost the whole thing – and not without those events dominating the more general principles we hoped to identify, such that people might read this review as a verdict on the latest political big thing and forget what it was supposed to be for. But we mention some of these events in passing and use a couple of brief examples. Of course, we hope the principles we think we've found have relevance to these events, as they'll have relevance in future, and we feel some of our latter interviews gave journalists the chance to think about these principles in this context, when we discussed them more informally. We feel this has already led to an encouraging change in reporting.

## **8. Recommendations**

Why didn't we say, for example, that there should be more training in economics for journalists? Because although it's clear we think parts of the BBC are light on economic understanding, there are lots of ways the BBC could respond. It could offer more training, of various kinds; it could hire more economically-minded staff;

it could run more internal briefings; it could hand more stories to the economics team; it could devise new programmes using outside presenters; it could do nothing at all because it thinks it has better things to do. We don't know its resources and don't know its priorities. We can say what we see; the BBC should decide what to do. We did not want to make recommendations without knowing the full context.

## **9. Acknowledgments**

A small number of people came in and out of the review to work on specific tasks, such as the extensive cataloguing of content and key words in BBC output, or trawling through social media posts, or with commissioning audience research. A couple also helped run the whole project from start to finish, offering valuable advice and guidance and keeping us organised. They did it all with flawless professionalism, skill and judgement, and we're hugely indebted to them.

### **Attachments:**

Terms of reference.

Audience research report.

External interviewees.