

10

Politics and Public Policy

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10.1 Introduction

The principles relating to the BBC's political impartiality and independence from political influence are central to its coverage of politics and public policy. Over an appropriate timeframe, the BBC's political content must give due weight and prominence to all the main strands of argument and to all relevant political parties. Although those in government will often be the primary focus of news and will, in particular, need to be held to account, the voices and opinions of other parties and those with other political views and interests should also be regularly aired and challenged. One of the BBC's public purposes is: *'To provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them ... so that all audiences can engage fully with major local, regional, national, United Kingdom and global issues and participate in the democratic process, at all levels, as active and informed citizens'*¹. It follows that there is a special responsibility to audiences who are about to vote in elections or referendums.

Content producers should be aware that any contributor, not just those from political parties, could offer political opinions or campaign on political issues. To achieve due impartiality, content producers will therefore need to make judgements about the inclusion or omission of any potential contributors to political output.

This section should be read in conjunction with Section 2 of the Editorial Guidelines: Impartiality. These ensure the BBC's output meets the standards of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code set out in Sections 5 (Due Impartiality and Due Accuracy and Undue Prominence of Views and Opinions) and 6 (Elections and Referendums).

It should also be read in conjunction with Editorial Guidelines Section 4: Conflicts of Interest and Section 11: Statistics, Data, Polls and Surveys.

¹ Article 6 (1) Broadcasting: Royal Charter for the Continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016

10.2 Principles

- 10.2.1 The BBC and all its output must treat matters of politics and public policy with due accuracy and due impartiality².
- 10.2.2 The BBC must not express an opinion on political or controversial issues or matters of current public policy. The exception is that the BBC may express a corporate view on policy concerning broadcasting or the provision of online services, or regarding freedom of expression.
- 10.2.3 Individuals expressing opinions on matters of current public policy (including broadcasting issues), politics and controversial issues may also jeopardise the BBC's impartiality.
- 10.2.4 The BBC does not commission voting intention polls during relevant election or referendum periods.

² Reference Ofcom Code Section 5 Meaning of Due Impartiality

10.3 Mandatory Referrals—must be referred in advance

Mandatory referrals are an essential part of the BBC's editorial and compliance process and must be observed.

Mandatory Referrals to Chief Adviser Politics

10.3.1 Where content would not normally include politicians, political opinions or 'controversial issues'—such as sport, music, quiz or panel shows, entertainment and lifestyle output—producers must consult Chief Adviser Politics in advance before inviting a politician to take part in their output, or before accepting a request to participate. This referral applies to all political figures such as MPs, councillors, mayors and PCCs, and is irrespective of whether the proposed contribution is itself 'political'.

See 10.4.3–10.4.5

10.3.2 Except for brief news interviews gathered on the day without pre-arrangement, Chief Adviser Politics must be consulted in advance about proposed interview bids or any other active participation in output (and before offers of such participation are accepted or declined) for the following political leaders in the UK: the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition at Westminster, the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland. In the nations of the UK, the respective Heads of News must also be consulted.

See 10.4.6–10.4.8

10.3.3 Any proposal to pay a fee (not including legitimate expenses) to an elected salaried politician or peer for any contribution to output, must be referred in advance to Chief Adviser Politics.

See 10.4.9

10.3.4 Any proposal to use material from the chambers or committees of Parliaments or Assemblies—including Westminster—outside respective rules of coverage must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics. This includes any proposal to use material from the Parliaments or Assemblies outside news, factual programmes

or content for educational purposes, which will also require relevant Intellectual Property Legal advice.

See 10.4.10

- 10.3.5 Any government request for a ministerial broadcast or a reply to a ministerial broadcast must be referred promptly to Chief Adviser Politics before a response is given³.
See 10.4.13–10.4.14
- 10.3.6 Any approach by a government department to relay official messages or information films must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.
See 10.4.15
- 10.3.7 Any proposal to commission an opinion poll (or use other methods, such as data analysis) with the intention of sampling party political support or voting intentions must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics for approval in advance.
See 10.4.16–10.4.18
See Section 11 Statistics, Data, Polls and Surveys: 11.4.33 and 11.4.36–11.4.38
- 10.3.8 Any proposal to commission an opinion poll or any sort of survey, vote or focus group on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on ‘controversial subjects’ in any other area, must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics in advance.
See 10.4.19–10.4.20
See Section 11 Statistics, Data, Polls and Surveys:
11.4.29–11.4.35 and 11.4.39–11.4.45

³ Section 67 Agreement to the BBC Charter

10.4 Guidelines

Coverage of Political Parties, Government and Devolution in the UK

10.4.1 The BBC should make, and be able to defend, editorial decisions regarding coverage of political parties on the basis that they are reasonable and carefully reached, with due impartiality. News judgements should drive editorial decision making in news-based programmes, ensuring due weight is given to conveying, examining and challenging the views and policies of all relevant parties in the UK over time.

The way in which due impartiality is achieved among parties will vary, depending on the format, platform and how the output relates to different parts of the UK. Deciding respective levels of coverage for different political parties, who have varying levels of political support, requires – primarily – good and impartial editorial judgement, rather than mathematical formulae. Evidence of past electoral support and of current electoral support should be taken into account in making judgements about appropriate levels of coverage and prominence.

Content producers must take responsibility for achieving due impartiality in their own output without necessarily relying on other BBC content or services.

10.4.2 The UK has diverse political cultures in the different nations; so, achieving appropriate coverage for political parties, especially for UK-wide output, means assessing relative political strength in this devolved structure. Achieving due impartiality involves taking account of the different parties in each nation, as well as those with electoral support across the UK.

Use of language is important in this context, for example, care should be taken around describing parties as ‘main’, ‘major’ or ‘minor’, taking account of the political landscape in each part of the UK. The term ‘government’ is understood differently in the nations; it should be clear to all audiences what is being referenced.

When referring to a given public policy and which government or minister has responsibility, it should be clear to the audience whether and how it may apply to different parts of the UK.

See guidance: Reporting the UK

Political Interviews and Contributions

10.4.3 Requests for political interviews should be clear about the nature of the output and the context for which they are intended. All arrangements must stand up to public scrutiny and must not prevent interviewees being asked appropriate questions.

When politicians (internationally, nationally or locally), or others who may be seeking office or campaigning politically, are being invited to contribute to non-political output, whether on the basis of their expertise outside politics or of their celebrity, they must not be given such prominence as to afford undue political advantage, especially in the run-up to and during election periods. Where relevant, their political allegiance should be made clear to the audience.

10.4.4 Where content would not normally include politicians, political opinions or 'controversial issues'—such as sport, music, quiz or panel shows, entertainment and lifestyle output—producers must consult Chief Adviser Politics in advance before inviting a politician to take part in their output, or before accepting a request to participate. This referral applies to all political figures such as MPs, councillors, police and crime commissioners, and executive mayors, and is irrespective of whether the proposed contribution is itself 'political'.

10.4.5 Where there is a proposal to involve others who may have taken a prominent political stance in such output, advice is available from Editorial Policy.

Interviews with or Profiles of Party Leaders

10.4.6 Any output where party leaders appear should give due weight over time to participation by other relevant party leaders (or their representatives); each should be consistent and robust in its own approach to interviews, ensuring there is appropriate scrutiny and editorial independence. On occasion, it may be necessary for the BBC to co-ordinate and rationalise bids across its output.

10.4.7 Except for brief news interviews gathered on the day without pre-arrangement, Chief Adviser Politics must be consulted in advance about proposed interview bids or any other active participation in output (and before offers of such participation are accepted or declined) for the following political leaders in the UK: the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition at Westminster, the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland. In the nations of the UK, the respective Heads of News must also be consulted.

10.4.8 Chief Adviser Politics (and, where appropriate, the relevant Head of News) should also be told whether the invitations are refused or accepted to ensure that:

- the BBC as a whole is robust and consistent in its dealings with the parties
- at all times of high demand, bids are rationalised within the BBC
- due weight is given to appearances over time
- there is a consistent editorial approach, for instance in terms of tone, in any series of interviews.

Payment to Politicians

10.4.9 The BBC does not normally pay elected salaried politicians for routine appearances or other contributions to BBC output in which they are speaking for their party or expressing political views. This includes MPs, MSPs, MSs, MLAs, executive mayors, police and crime commissioners (including independents) or others clearly identified as representing political parties, such as peers. They can, where appropriate, be paid a limited and realistic disturbance fee and/or any reimbursement for legitimate expenses.

There may be circumstances where a politician can be paid a fee for contributions to non-political output, such as if they are appearing on the basis of a particular expertise or relating to their celebrity outside politics. Only exceptionally, in fulfilling a role beyond normal political coverage, can they be paid for a political contribution.

Any proposal to pay a fee (not including legitimate expenses) to an elected salaried politician or peer, for any contribution to output, must be referred in advance to Chief Adviser Politics.

Parliamentary Broadcasting in the UK

10.4.10 The House of Commons, the House of Lords, committees of both houses, as well as the Scottish Parliament, the Senedd and the Northern Ireland Assembly have rules of coverage which should normally be observed.

Any proposal to use material from the chambers or committees of Parliaments or Assemblies—including Westminster—outside respective rules of coverage must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics. This includes any proposal to use material from the Parliaments or Assemblies outside news, factual programmes or content for educational purposes, which will also require relevant Intellectual Property Legal advice.

Political Broadcasts

Party Political, Election and Referendum Broadcasts in the UK

10.4.11 The BBC is obliged to make airtime available for party political broadcasts and referendum campaign broadcasts⁴. These are separate from the BBC's own content, and their transmission does not imply BBC support for the views contained in them.

Appropriate allocation of a series of broadcasts fulfils the requirement for due impartiality.

The copyright of broadcasts belongs to the parties or referendum campaign groups, but extracts may be used without their consent.

10.4.12 Parties make the broadcasts at their own expense and are responsible for their content. However, the BBC has to ensure they are compliant for broadcast, conforming to the law, to relevant parts of the Ofcom Code,⁵ to relevant parts of the BBC's Editorial Guidelines and to production guidelines outlined on the Broadcasters' Liaison Group website⁶.

See Section 5 Harm and Offence

Ministerial Broadcasts and Government Information

10.4.13 In exceptional circumstances, such as a decision to go to war or other national emergencies, the BBC may be required⁷ to provide time for a broadcast by a UK government minister. In such circumstances, it may also be necessary for the BBC to consider whether responses from other political parties

⁴ Schedule 3 (5), Broadcasting: An Agreement Between Her Majesty' Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and The British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016

⁵ www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0035/99188/pprb-rules-december-2020.pdf

⁶ Broadcasters' Liaison Group website www.bbc.co.uk/broadcastersliaisongroup

⁷ Clause 67 Defence and Emergency Arrangements, Broadcasting: An Agreement Between Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016

or governments within the UK are appropriate. The BBC, as broadcaster, has the final say on the broadcast's acceptability in terms of its compliance with appropriate legal and other standards.

See Section 12 War, Terror and Extreme Violence, Disaster and Disorder: 12.4.22

10.4.14 Any government request for a ministerial broadcast or a reply to a ministerial broadcast must be referred promptly to Chief Adviser Politics before a response is given⁸

10.4.15 Any approach by a government department to relay official messages or information films must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.

Opinion Polls and Surveys

This sub-section should be read in conjunction with Section 11: Statistics, Data, Polls and Surveys and with the guidance: Opinion polls, surveys, questionnaires, votes and 'straw polls'.

Voting Intention Polls

10.4.16 The BBC rarely commissions polls on voting intention or other indications of party-political support and never publishes them during relevant election or referendum periods.

If such a poll is commissioned in the UK, other than in exceptional circumstances, the BBC should use members of the British Polling Council. For outside the UK, advice is available from the Political Research Unit.

See 10.4.26–10.4.28

⁸ Section 67 Agreement to the BBC Charter

10.4.17 Any proposal to commission an opinion poll (or use other methods, such as data analysis) with the intention of sampling party political support or voting intentions must be referred in advance to Chief Adviser Politics for approval.

Technical advice, for example, on question design, is available from the Political Research Unit.

10.4.18 When reporting voting intention polls:

- in the UK they should, normally, have been conducted by a member of the British Polling Council
- the result, on its own, of a single voting intention poll should not be the lead, or be headlined on any output
- the findings of voting intention polls must be reported in the context of trend, which may consist of the results of all major polls over a period or may be limited to the change in a single pollster's findings
- poll results which are out of step without convincing explanation should be treated with particular care
- the audience should be told when the reported difference between two significant parties is less than the margin of error of the given poll.

Political and Public Policy Opinion Polls, Surveys, Votes and Focus Groups

10.4.19 Polls or any form of survey, especially those which are seeking opinions on current public policy, political issues or controversies, or seeking the views of politicians, can be expected to come under particular scrutiny with regard to accuracy, robustness and impartiality. They can involve reputational risk, so care must be taken both when they are commissioned and reported.

There will be increased risk if the BBC commissions a survey of any kind involving an organisation which itself campaigns or has a view relating to the issue.

Other ways of illustrating views on politics, such as focus groups, vox pops, online votes, etc may also risk undermining the BBC's journalism if used inappropriately.

10.4.20 Any proposal to commission an opinion poll or any sort of survey, vote or focus group on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on 'controversial subjects' in any other area, must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics in advance⁹.

Technical advice, for example, on question design, is available from the Political Research Unit.

Elections and Referendums

UK Elections and Referendums

10.4.21 The BBC's commitment to impartiality and fairness is under intense scrutiny when people are preparing to vote. Specific Election Guidelines are published for each national election and referendum which supplement the Editorial Guidelines¹⁰ and the Ofcom Broadcasting Code¹¹. For elections, they include a code of practice regarding the participation of candidates in each constituency or electoral area, as required by electoral law¹². Unless formally replaced or updated, Elections Guidelines remain in place with regard to by-elections until the next equivalent election, for example, for the duration of a Westminster Parliament. The principles of fairness and due impartiality that underlie the BBC's coverage of national votes should also inform reporting of other statutory votes in the UK, such as parish polls and parish council elections.

10.4.22 News judgements must continue to drive editorial decision making in news-based programmes and those judgements,

⁹ Ofcom Code Section 5 for Meaning of 'matters of political or industrial controversy and matters relating to current public policy'

¹⁰ In the run-up to and during the election period, see the Editorial Policy website for Election Guidelines

¹¹ www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/section-six-elections-referendums

¹² Section 144 Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000

during elections or referendums, should be made within a framework of democratic debate. During the election period, due weight should be given to conveying, examining and challenging the views and policies of all relevant parties and candidates, including, where appropriate, independent candidates.

Some output will need extra care and consideration in terms of scheduling during election periods and in the run-up to election campaigns. Content makers should consult Chief Adviser Politics at an early stage when there may be a risk to impartiality, for instance, from one-off dramas, even if of a historical nature, appearances by politicians in non-political output, or programmes intending to achieve impartiality over time.

Some elections, such as executive mayoral contests, may have a long lead-in time, where campaigning with a particular focus on individuals can begin a year or more before polling day. All output, including non-political, will need to give consideration over this period to the need for impartiality and fairness to candidates and those seeking nomination.

See 10.4.4

See Section 2 Impartiality: 2.4.31–2.4.32

10.4.23 On polling day the BBC will cease to report campaigns from 0600 until the polls close. Coverage will be restricted to uncontroversial factual accounts, such as the appearance of politicians at polling stations or the weather. Subjects which have been at issue or part of the campaign, or other controversial matters relating to the election, must not receive coverage before the polls close, to ensure that nothing in the BBC's output can be construed as unduly influencing the ballot.

Particular care should also be taken with any material published on social media accounts—including those of individuals—while the polls are open.

Opinion Polls during UK Elections and Referendums

- 10.4.24 Election Guidelines for each formal election and referendum period will include specific advice on the treatment of relevant opinion polls¹³.
- 10.4.25 No opinion poll on any subject relating to politics or the relevant election, including voting intention polls, may be published on polling day until after the polls have closed; it is a criminal offence in the UK to publish information about how people have voted while the polls are open.

Reporting Elections and Referendums outside the UK

- 10.4.26 The principles of fairness and due impartiality that underlie the BBC's coverage of UK votes should also inform reporting in other countries. However, reporting of these elections may take into account the circumstances under which the particular election is being held, especially where there are questions about the openness or fairness of the democratic process.
- 10.4.27 Additional issues may arise when BBC content is aimed specifically at an audience within the country where an election or referendum is taking place. Content originally made for UK audiences and distributed on international services may risk influencing a vote inappropriately. If necessary, it may need amendment, cancellation or delay until polling is over.

¹³ In the run-up and during the election period, see the Editorial Policy website for Election Guidelines

10.4.28 Countries outside the UK may have different specific laws applying to reporting while votes are taking place or during their election period. Where BBC content is distributed specifically to that country there may be legal issues to consider.

In some countries, legal requirements around elections and referendums may come into conflict with the BBC's fundamental editorial principles, especially those of fairness and impartiality. In such cases, the BBC will maintain its own editorial principles even if that means a local broadcaster is unable to re-distribute BBC content or services. This is particularly important for BBC News International Services and BBC Online.