



From the Director-General

20 January 2015

Sir William Cash MP
Chairman, European Scrutiny Committee
House of Commons
14 Tothill Street
London SW1H 9NB

Dear Sir William

Thank you for your further letter of 14 January.

Subsequent to receipt of your letter, I have looked at the Committee evidence session that took place on the 14th January with Rona Fairhead, Chairman of the BBC Trust and Richard Ayre, Chair of the Trust Editorial Standards Committee.

I note that in a long session they answered the Committee's questions in some detail as to why we believe that the opportunity for the Committee to question the BBC Trust about their role in holding the BBC Executive, including the Director General, to account struck the appropriate balance between ensuring the independence of the BBC, and the BBC quite properly, and as it regularly does, giving evidence to Parliament.

I also note that they explained in their answers, at an appropriate level of detail, the processes and mechanisms by which the Trust ensures the BBC is fulfilling the public purposes laid out in the BBC Charter and Agreement.

They also explained the role the Trust plays in monitoring and updating the BBC Editorial Guidelines and in consulting the public on any further guidelines that are put in place for the coverage of elections and referenda. They also explained the Trust's role in conducting regular, evidence based reviews of the BBCs coverage in specific areas.

Having looked at this, and the comprehensive nature of the information provided, I cannot presently see how I could add any useful further detail or insight on the processes that are used by the BBC Trust to hold the BBC to its remit.

I continue to have concerns, which were not assuaged by the content of this session, of the risk that we are seen by the British public and overseas to be being questioned by politicians on editorial judgments made by our journalists in our coverage of Europe and the European Scrutiny processes. This, I believe would not strike the correct balance that I have outlined earlier.

I note Richard Ayre's evidence to you where he stated: Before I became a trustee, I used to work at the BBC 15 years ago. I was a BBC journalist. At one stage, 20 years ago, I was the controller of editorial policy for the BBC. If I had been asked for my advice by the DG of the day, Lord Birt, on whether he should appear before a Select Committee four months before a general election in which the subject area of that Committee was likely to be a matter of extreme contention, I would have advised him that it was a real threat to the BBC's independence. At a time when freedom of expression, the press, the media and speech has much occupied this nation and our neighbour nations in recent days, I can entirely understand why he might have reached that view.

I would be astonished were the director-general to take a different view, had he been summoned before the Treasury Committee to talk about the BBC's editorial coverage of the economy or the Home Affairs Committee to talk about the BBC's coverage of immigration or crime. All of those are key issues in an election campaign. I submit that audiences would not be pleased to think that the editor-in-chief of the BBC was subjected to questioning by MPs on these editorial issues in the run-up to one of the most contentious elections we have lived through.

In this context I note that the Committee in its session with the BBC Trust did on occasion seek to question the decisions made by programme editors in their coverage of individual stories, as you stated during the session: *It is the subject matter and the manner in which it is handled; who is put on and is not put on; and what questions are asked and what questions are not asked.*

And this was put even in even more granularity by Mr Connarty in terms of the coverage given by the BBC to one of the European Scrutiny Committee's own reports: *has the Trust sought any explanation of, or is it even aware of the need to seek an explanation or justification for, the BBC's apparent refusal to cover in depth this Committee's November 2013 scrutiny report ...?*

I note that the portrayal of Europe in 'Top Gear' was also raised.

Considering all of the above, I remain strongly of the view that do not think it would be appropriate as we are now in a pre-election period, for the BBC to give further oral evidence, especially in light of the pre-election period that we are now in.

However, it is also increasingly clear from our correspondence that we not going to agree on this point, and, as I have said in my previous letter, I do not intend any disrespect to the Committee. I also note the point made by Mr Rees-Mogg that while he was strongly of the view that I should appear he was *'not entirely unsympathetic to the argument that you are putting forward about the BBC not wanting to appear before an election'*.

With strong reservations, but also bearing in mind the assurances in your most recent letter, I would be willing to appear on a date after the General Election.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony Hall', written in a cursive style.

Tony Hall
Director-General

cc: John Whittingdale MP
Rt Hon Sir Alan Beith MP