

The BBC and “Europe”
Coverage by the Today programme
of EU affairs from March 19 - June
23, 2007

Executive Summary Only

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The Today programme's coverage of EU affairs was monitored by Newswatch in a survey running for 14 weeks from March 19 to June 23, 2007, in the build-up towards the European Council meeting of June 21-22 at which the 'reform treaty' was agreed in outline by the heads of state of the member countries. These are among the main findings:

(It should be noted that, although the EU decided to call the document a 'reform treaty', this was disputed all along by eurosceptics, who maintained that the document was the revived Constitution in all but name. Newswatch has therefore adopted the more neutral terms 'revised document' or 'revised working arrangements'.)

This was a period of major EU activity, but coverage of EU affairs on the Today programme slumped to a record low of 2.7% of available airtime for most of the 14 weeks, despite high-profile promises by BBC news management in the wake of the Wilson report that EU-related output would be boosted, and claims by the Director General that it has been.

On June 23, the day that agreement was reached, Today devoted four times more airtime to the Glastonbury Rock Festival than to coverage of the eurosceptic case against the revised working arrangements. Coverage of the eurosceptic case amounted to only seven interviews (22 minutes and 40 seconds of airtime) over the entire 14 weeks, even though the story was continually developing and there was mounting pressure for a referendum among both Labour and Opposition ranks.

UKIP, a main conduit of views about withdrawal and further growth of EU powers, was not asked any questions at all during the survey about the revised working arrangements. Remarks by UKIP spokesmen in four appearances by the party occupied only around five minutes out of 238 hours of programming. On the sole occasion when there was a debate about UKIP concerns - relating to whether the EU brought benefits to the UK - the UKIP spokesman was treated unfairly.

Only one senior government minister - the then foreign secretary, Margaret Beckett - was asked about the EU's revised treaty arrangements in the entire survey period. Geoff Hoon, the Europe Minister, did not figure at all, and there was only one appearance by his Conservative counterpart, Mark Francois. There were no interviews with, or mention of, Labour or Liberal-Democrat figures concerned about the new working arrangements. In this respect, the

programme seemed to have all but abandoned efforts to mount comprehensive coverage of EU affairs.

BBC correspondents, in their reporting of the moves towards the new treaty, regularly articulated the negative sentiment within the EU about Britain's reservations, but very rarely explained or even mentioned eurosceptic concerns. On some occasions, BBC Europe correspondent Jonny Dymond, the biggest contributor to Today's coverage of the revised treaty document, appeared to push the EU perspective on events disproportionately, to the point of bias.

The programme and its correspondents used biased terminology to apply to the revised working arrangements. From early on, they described the document as a 'reform treaty', in line with the EU's own terminology, but seemingly disregarding the position of eurosceptics, who contended the document was the Constitution in all but name. And on the morning of the agreement, there seemed to be complete acceptance in bulletins and reports that the government had won all it had set out to achieve even though this, too, was disputed by eurosceptics.

The case for a referendum on the new working arrangements - which, according to polls was supported by 80% of the UK electorate - was handled sparsely, unfairly and ineptly. There were only two dedicated interviews on the topic. In each, there were elements that contravened BBC editorial guidelines. James Naughtie treated Ruth Lea, the guest who put the case for a referendum, more toughly than Professor Jo Shaw, who argued against one being held.

The programme covered Polish objections to voting weight proposals - which included a row over references to Germany's conduct in the Second World War - extensively. This would have been fine had there been more coverage overall, but as it was, the Polish material used up scarce airtime and crowded out material about British issues.

Coverage of EU affairs in general in the 14 weeks of the survey was mainly outside peak programme listening hours, with evidence that negative EU stories were regularly placed in the 6am-7am slot.

In the week of the European Council meeting, there was 89 minutes of EU coverage 13.9% of Today feature time. This was considerably higher than the 2.7% average during the survey as a

whole, but half that at other equivalent times of major EU-related developments: for example, 31% in the week of the French and Dutch referenda in June 2005.

In June 2004, immediately before the Wilson report, the average length of EU-related features was 4m 58 secs. but was 2m 45 seconds during the current survey, indicating that coverage had become more fragmented. In the European council meeting of June 2005, there were 44 EU-related reports lasting seven minutes or more, in June 2007, there were only eight of this length.

Over the survey period, 42% (52 people) of EU-related programme guests expressed views in favour of the EU or its legislation; 25% (31 contributors) were against, and 34% (42) were neutral. The proportion of sceptical speakers was second lowest of nine equivalent surveys.

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