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Programme Complaints Appeals to the Governors

The Board of Governors is responsible for overseeing the running of the BBC, to ensure that the BBC serves the public interest. We do this in a range of ways, such as setting key objectives and approving strategy and policy. Most importantly for this bulletin, we are responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of complaints handling by the BBC, including hearing appeals from complainants who are not happy with the responses they have received from management to serious programme complaints.

The Governors' Programme Complaints Committee is a subcommittee of five members drawn from the full Board of Governors. For a full account of our remit, please see the last page of this bulletin.

Foreword by the Chairman of the Governors' Programme Complaints Committee

It is the job of the Governors' Programme Complaints Committee (GPCC) to ensure that complaints are properly handled by the BBC. This includes taking appeals from people who are not satisfied with management's response to serious editorial complaints. We review the programme or online content against the BBC's editorial values and guidelines, and make a judgement on whether or not the content concerned has breached the standards set out.



Richard Tait
Chairman of the Governors' Programme Complaints Committee

Contents

Page

Summary of findings (July 2006)

The Moral Maze, Radio 4, 4 February 2006

5

Remit of the Governors' Programme Complaints Committee

7

Summary of findings (July 2006)

The Moral Maze

Radio 4, 4 February 2006

a) The programme

The Moral Maze is a radio programme which began in 1990. Its website states: *Michael Buerk chairs a live debate examining the moral issues behind one of the week's news stories: combative, provocative and engaging.*

The website also quotes Michael Buerk as saying: "*The Moral Maze* does not make any concessions, either intellectually or to the politeness normal in current affairs broadcasting. The intellectual vigour allows us to indulge in abuse!"

b) The complaint

The complainant argued that the programme created religious bias, by having the panellist Clifford Longley labelled in terms of his religion (as a "Catholic writer"). The complainant felt this to be "far too overt" in the present climate, and that either the panel should have included overt representatives of other religious faiths or overtly religious writers to create balance or, alternatively, that no mention should have been made of Clifford Longley's Catholic background.

The complainant did not have an issue with Clifford Longley himself, and indeed enjoyed and appreciated the programme.

c) Applicable programme standards

Achieving impartiality

Impartiality must be adequate and appropriate to our output. Our approach to achieving it will therefore vary according to the nature of the subject, the type of output, the likely audience expectation and the extent to which the content and approach is signposted to our audiences.

Impartiality is described in the Agreement as "due impartiality". It requires us to be fair and open minded when examining the evidence and weighing all the material facts, as well as being objective and even handed in our approach to a subject. It does not require the representation of every argument or facet of every argument on every occasion or an equal division of time for each view.

Impartiality & diversity of opinion

We strive to be fair and open minded and reflect all significant strands of opinion by exploring the range and conflict of views. We will be objective and even handed in our approach to a subject. We will provide professional judgments where appropriate, but we will never promote a particular view on controversial matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy.

In practice, our commitment to impartiality means:

- we seek to provide a properly balanced service consisting of a wide range of subject matter and views broadcast over an appropriate time scale across all our output. We take particular care when dealing with political or industrial controversy or major matters relating to current public policy.*
- we strive to reflect a wide range of opinion and explore a range and conflict of views so that no significant strand of thought is knowingly unreflected or under represented.*

- *we exercise our editorial freedom to produce content about any subject, at any point on the spectrum of debate as long as there are good editorial reasons for doing so.*
- *we can explore or report on a specific aspect of an issue or provide an opportunity for a single view to be expressed, but in doing so we do not misrepresent opposing views. They may also require a right of reply.*
- *we must ensure we avoid bias or an imbalance of views on controversial subjects.*
- *we should not automatically assume that academics and journalists from other organisations are impartial and make it clear to our audience when contributors are associated with a particular viewpoint.*

Impartiality in series

Programmes dealing with widely disparate issues from one programme to the next but also clearly linked as a strand with a common title. *These should normally achieve impartiality within individual programmes, or across two or three editorially linked programmes, rather than across the strand as a whole.*

d) The Committee's decision

The Committee considered the complaint against the relevant editorial guidelines, taking into account all the material relating to the case.

The Committee's starting point was how Clifford Longley was described in relation to other members of the panel. It felt it was reasonable for panellists to be identified by the title that they wished to be known by, as long as it was accurate. In Clifford Longley's case it accepted that his own description as a "Catholic writer" accurately described what he did and who he was, just as, for example, another panellist, Melanie Phillips, was described as a social commentator for the *Daily Mail*. The Committee also felt it helped indicate to the audience the roles and backgrounds of the panel so that they could understand a panellist's perspective.

The Committee also considered the role of the panel and whether it was appropriate to have a Catholic participant without representation from other religions. It noted that the point of the programme was not primarily for panellists to express their views, but to interrogate witnesses in an attempt to explore in detail the moral issue under discussion. The Committee, having listened to the programme highlighted in the complaint, felt that this was particularly in evidence. The contribution of the panellists was to provide intellectual scrutiny, rather than to represent a balance of perspectives.

In conclusion, the Committee did not feel that Clifford Longley's stated title or his involvement in the programme led to imbalance or bias.

Finding: not upheld.

Remit of the Governors' Programme Complaints Committee

The Governors' Programme Complaints Committee (GPCC) consists of five Governors of the BBC, who are responsible to the full Board of Governors for ensuring that complaints made by viewers and listeners are "given due consideration by and are properly handled by" the Corporation, as required under the Charter. The activities and conclusions of the GPCC are reported to the full Board of Governors. The Committee members are Richard Tait (Chairman), Deborah Bull, Professor Fabian Monds, Angela Sarkis and Professor Merfyn Jones.

In fulfilling this remit, the GPCC undertakes regular reviews of the BBC's processes and performance in relation to complaints handling. In particular, the GPCC provides for the independent oversight of the BBC's strategic approach to complaints handling, and for monitoring the effectiveness of its processes, to ensure that both serve the public interest and reflect best practice.

In line with the GPCC's responsibility for monitoring the effectiveness of complaints handling by BBC management, it is also the specific function of the GPCC to consider appeals against decisions and actions of the Editorial Complaints Unit (ECU) in dealing with serious editorial complaints, where complaints allege:

- that the complainant has suffered unfair treatment in a transmitted item
- that the complainant's privacy has been unjustifiably infringed, either in a programme or item as transmitted, or in the process of making the programme or item, or
- that there has otherwise been a failure adequately to observe the BBC's Editorial Guidelines

In order to give full consideration to an appeal, the GPCC may make any further enquiries of the complainant, or of those responsible for making the programme, which it considers necessary to determine the appeal fairly. The GPCC aims to reach a final decision on an appeal within 16 weeks of receiving the request.

The findings for all appeals are reported in this bulletin, *Programme Complaints: Appeals to the Governors*. The bulletin is available online at www.bbcgovernors.co.uk.

For a copy of the full remit of the GPCC, please write to:

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