



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

BBC BIAS?

TWO SHORT CASE STUDIES

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SUMMARY

- In the last 18 months, reports by Lord Wilson of Dinton (the former Cabinet Secretary), Ron Neil (former BBC managing director of Broadcast) and Lord Hutton have all criticised various aspects of standards of BBC news.
- Since at least the mid-1980s, the BBC has often been criticised for a perceived bias against those on the centre-right of politics.
- This paper presents two brief case studies. Both analyse the coverage of the Today programme, the BBC's highly regarded and agenda-setting morning radio news programme.
- The first case study looks at the coverage of the 2004 Labour and Conservative Party Conferences. It finds that:
 - while the airtime given to the Labour and Conservative Conferences was much the same, Labour Cabinet spokesmen were given 50% more airtime than their Conservative counterparts (50 minutes compared to 33 minutes);
 - Conservative spokesmen were subjected to disparaging or ambiguous introductions. Labour spokesmen were not;
 - Conservative spokesmen were subject to tougher scrutiny and questioning, with more interruptions in their shorter interviews, than Government spokesmen. Tony Blair was allowed to speak uninterrupted for 375 words, Gordon Brown for 342 words and John Prescott for 286 words. In contrast, Michael Howard's longest interrupted passage was 211 words, David Davis' 153 words, and Oliver Letwin's 112 words.

- The second case study looks at the period from 31 March 2005 (when Parliament was dissolved) to 15 April 2005 (the end of the first week of election campaigning). This reveals that:
 - while the Labour Party's economic record and policy were not subject to critical scrutiny, the Conservative Party proposals were. The difference in approach to interviews with the Chancellor Gordon Brown and his Shadow counterpart Oliver Letwin was striking. Gordon Brown's main interview lasted 11 minutes 15 seconds (during which the interviewer spoke for 30% of the time), while Oliver Letwin's interview on the same day lasted 5 minutes 18 seconds (during which the interviewer spoke for 40% of the time);
 - the airtime given to Labour to discuss the management of the economy was over twice that given to the Conservatives (37 minutes 49 seconds compared to 16 minutes 30 seconds);
- Also during this period, *The Times* carried two front page stories that were critical of the Labour Party. Neither were run by the Today programme. The one story on the front page of *The Times* during this period which was critical of the Conservatives was strongly featured on the Today programme.
- There is no evidence of deliberate or even conscious bias. But there is evidence of weak editorial control and uneven levels of consistency and balance. Urgent action is required to put this right.

INTRODUCTION

Senior managers appear insufficiently self-critical about standards of impartiality. They seem to take it as a given, with little serious thought as to how it applies in practice. This attitude appears to have filtered through to producers, reporters and presenters in the front line. There is no evidence of any systematic monitoring to ensure that all shades of significant opinion are fairly represented and there is a resistance to accepting external evidence. Leaving decisions to individual programme editors means that if there is bias in the coverage overall, no one in the BBC would know about it.¹

The report by Lord Wilson of Dinton, the former Cabinet Secretary, into the corporation's output on the European Union found that it was inadequate and perceived to be biased. His findings also confirmed the shortcomings in terms of reporting standards, training and presentation that had been outlined in former BBC managing director of Broadcast Ron Neil's review of standards.² And they, in effect, endorsed the criticisms made by Lord Hutton in his report on the events leading to the death of Dr David Kelly.³

¹ BBC, *BBC News Coverage of the European Union*, January 2005. This report was carried out by former Cabinet Secretary Lord Wilson of Dinton with the assistance of two eminent Europhiles and two eminent Eurosceptics.

² See www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/neil_report.shtml

³ Lord Hutton, *Report of the Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Death of Dr David Kelly* CMG, January 2004.

Can the same criticisms be made of the BBC's party political coverage? For several years, many commentators, academics, former BBC journalists and producers and politicians have noted a persistent institutional bias against those advocating centre-right policies.⁴ In addition, the interchange of personnel between New Labour, the BBC and the Government since 1997, and the appointment of Labour Party supporters and donors to the highest levels of the BBC has also served to heighten disquiet.

As the former Cabinet Secretary Lord Wilson of Dinton pointed out, the BBC conducts little systematic analysis of its own output and therefore cannot judge the extent to which its coverage is biased.

Are these anxieties warranted? Lord Wilson of Dinton trenchantly pointed out that the BBC conducts little systematic analysis of its own output, and therefore cannot judge the extent to which its coverage is biased. This lack of evidence is particularly worrying during a General Election, and for the period immediately preceding it. For it is of course particularly important that the BBC observes, and is seen to observe, the need for impartiality.⁵ Has the BBC adhered to its own rules?

Is the BBC meeting its Royal Charter obligations? The evidence presented here – itself based on a five year research programme of BBC broadcasts – suggests not.

⁴ See for example, *The Daily Telegraph* Beebwatch column Autumn 2003, M McElwee and G Gaskarth, *Guardian of the Airwaves*, Cchange, 2003; Professor W D Rubinstein, *Why the BBC in its present form should be abolished*, Social Affairs Unit, 2004, Tim Luckhurst, "He's right about the left", *The Times*, 8 April 2005; and a telling case study was the report commissioned by *The Guardian* from Loughborough University's Communications Centre which compared Jeremy Paxman's 2001 Newsnight interviews with William Hague and Tony Blair.

⁵ The rules set out by the BBC for election coverage are stringently clear and are defined in BBC Producer Guidelines updated for the General Election. See www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/producer_guides/

CASE STUDY ONE

THE LABOUR AND CONSERVATIVE PARTY CONFERENCES

Today held three sets of comparable prime time (8.10am) interviews during the 2004 Party Conferences: Gordon Brown with Oliver Letwin (broadly on the economy); John Prescott⁶ with David Davis (broadly on domestic policy); and Tony Blair with Michael Howard (broadly on leadership issues and foreign policy).

In these interviews, Labour interviewees were granted significantly more airtime and commanded a much higher proportion of the total time dedicated to their conference coverage: 50 minutes for Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and John Prescott together, compared with only 33 minutes for Michael Howard, Oliver Letwin and David Davis. In addition, domestic policy issues were largely ignored in the Labour interviews. The senior Labour figures were not questioned at all on their record on, or future plans for, migration, asylum, policing and crime while the Conservatives were cross-examined on these topics. The contrast in treatment was most stark over the question of the management of the economy.

⁶ It is not clear in the case of the Labour Party Conference why John Prescott was chosen (or put forward by the Labour Party) instead of David Blunkett, who on the second day of the conference, gave a major speech about street crime and his community policemen policy. The selection of spokesmen for the key spots, whoever was responsible – the Today programme or the Labour Party – to an extent determined the policy issues discussed and therefore the balance of the coverage.

The interview with Oliver Letwin was under half the length (9 minutes) of that with Gordon Brown (20 minutes). Oliver Letwin's interview was preceded by a critical introduction from the presenter James Naughtie, in which he implied that the Conservative's pledges on public services could not be met. Before Oliver Letwin was interviewed, the BBC's Economics Editor, Evan Davis made a lengthy, three minute critique of Conservative economic policy.⁷ Oliver Letwin's proposals were thrown into doubt before he had even had a chance to outline them.

⁷ Evan Davis: "Oliver Letwin wants to talk about tax, he wants tax cuts and so does his party. He has plenty to say about how Gordon Brown has used small taxes to raise big money about how taxes that were once never talked about like inheritance tax and stamp duty have become the pin points of our tax system. But Mr Letwin has a huge hurdle to overcome before he can make credible promises on tax – he has to sort out public spending to show that he can afford tax cuts. Now the time was when politicians could promise anything in the run up to a general election undisturbed by the fact that the promise was undeliverable. But times have changed. You don't get away with that any more. The media, think tanks like the Institute for Fiscal Studies – they'll expose unaffordable plans. So the first question for any party is – do the sums add up and a good shadow chancellor makes sure that they do. Of course politics is manifestly less fun when constrained by the rules of arithmetic but all three main parties have discovered a new way of making promises. It's to ensure that the sums add up by introducing funny numbers into the calculations; these numbers are the savings to be made from cutting waste. Painless savings, savings the party can use to fund its other commitments. By using this kind of accounting the party's solved one problem, getting fiscal sums to add up but creates another – delivering painless savings. It brings to mind an old war joke – that Hitler asked his key scientists to find a way of making margarine out of manure. The scientists went away with this impossible task and after a long delay Hitler demanded to know what progress they had made. We are half way there said the chief scientist we've got it to spread evenly. Well the Party's done the easy bit getting their spending plans to add up but have left the difficult task of cutting waste ahead of them. Now I stress the Conservatives are not alone in this but they are relying on cutting waste rather more than the other parties. So on Friday, the Conservatives promised to quote to spend 2.7 billion pounds more than Labour on defence. This sounded implausible as the Conservatives are planning to restrain defence spending the small print makes clear will spend more on front line defence because it will spend a lot less on back office defence. It's quite possible that this ambitious back office cut can be found – it has been done in former nationalised industries but how are we to know that it can occur in Whitehall or who will cut waste best? we are being asked to chose not just between different parties priorities who'll spend more on health or defence – we are being asked to judge their competence – who'll spend more wisely or efficiently. Speaking as someone ... I find it hard to assess – will the Tories really cut just bureaucrats or will the end up cutting the quality of public services. That's the credibility test that Mr Letwin faces – past that he can talk about the nice bit. the tax cuts". Today Programme 4 October 2004.

This was robust journalism. But the same approach was not used before the Chancellor's interview. John Humphrys opened his interview with Gordon Brown, by contrast, on a fulsome note:

John Humphrys: When Gordon Brown rises to his feet here in Brighton, to make his big conference speech today, he will do so as the longest-serving chancellor for nearly two centuries. And, as the most successful chancellor the Labour Party has ever had. You'd have trouble finding a delegate here or an economist anywhere who would argue with that.

Had Gordon Brown's pensions, tax and general economic policies then been cross-examined, the interview might have been fair (compared to Oliver Letwin's). But they were not. Reservations by independent forecasters about both the looming pensions' crisis and Gordon Brown's black hole were topical and relevant. But such concerns were neither assessed by the BBC's economics editor nor did they form the basis of an introductory piece nor were they the basis for critical scrutiny during the interview.

The longest that Oliver Letwin was allowed to speak for uninterrupted was 112 words, compared to 342 words for Gordon Brown.

Similarly, while Oliver Letwin had hardly been allowed to finish a complete sentence without being interrupted, Gordon Brown often spoke without interruption. The Chancellor's longest uninterrupted contribution was 342 words – over three times longer than that of Letwin at 112 words. There is no evidence that Letwin is less truthful or has less integrity than Gordon Brown. There is no inherent reason why James Naughtie would not let him speak while John Humphrys did allow Gordon Brown to speak.

A similar story emerges from an analysis of other Conservative and Labour spokesmen. Michael Howard's longest uninterrupted passage was 211 words and David Davis' only 153.⁸ Yet Tony Blair was able to speak for 375 words unchecked, closely followed by Gordon Brown with 342 words and John Prescott 286.

⁸ In the interview with David Davis, James Naughtie, actually spoke *more* than David Davis, taking 52% of the interview to criticise Conservative policies. Although he produced nothing more than speculative evidence for his view that the Tory policies were "*more bureaucratic and less imaginative*" than Labour's policies, he dominated the interview with his analysis and left David Davis with little time or space to counter his questioning, alleging that Conservative policies were either, in his words "*a good way to get a cheer at any party conference*" or would prove costly. In contrast, John Humphry's interview with John Prescott was almost benign. Issues not brought up in the Prescott interview included the then impending elections to the regional assemblies, and criticisms from both house builders and environmentalists of the national housing policy.

CASE STUDY TWO

THE ELECTION DEBATE ON THE MANAGEMENT OF THE ECONOMY

In some ways the territory the election is being fought over is actually quite narrow. It is about the management of the economy, in a society and economy in which there is broad agreement – of course there are differences – but there's broad agreement about the kind of society we have, whereas 40 years ago there wasn't.⁹

The General Election period effectively began on 31 March with the dissolution of Parliament.¹⁰

Monitoring the output of the Today programme from that day until the end of the first week of formal campaigning (15 April) shows a remarkable disparity in the studio interview airtime allocated to Labour compared to the Conservatives: in these two weeks of the campaign, Labour spokesmen had a total of 37 minutes 49 seconds to make their economic case, compared to just 16 minutes 30 seconds for the Conservatives. This was patently unfair. The Labour spokesmen had far longer to make their case and more opportunities to attack the Conservatives. The following analysis suggests that the disparities in editorial approach and treatment were marked – and all in favour of Labour.

⁹ James Naughtie, Today, 11 April 2005.

¹⁰ While the Election was not formally called until 5 April, it had been an open secret that the Election was about to be called.

31 MARCH: ALAN MILBURN

On 31 March, the Labour Party held its last Cabinet meeting before the election. According to Andrew Marr on the Today programme that day, the strategic decision to put the economy at the centre of Labour's campaign was to be taken. On the same day, embarrassingly for the Government, the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) reported that average households had got poorer in 2003 as a result of the Chancellor's tax and benefits changes.

James Naughtie interviewed Alan Milburn, Labour's official General Election Co-ordinator, for 10 minutes, on this and other issues in the prime 8.10am slot. Despite a robust first question (*"If it's an enterprise economy, why are average household incomes falling for the first time in 15 years?"*) Alan Milburn was allowed to put a less damaging gloss on the IFS report's findings. He claimed that if the self-employed were removed from the figures there would have been no drop in incomes. Although James Naughtie countered by twice repeating the IFS main findings, he did not challenge Milburn's specific line of defence, nor his contention that on average families would be £1,300 better off. He let Alan Milburn talk for 50 seconds about an OECD report which showed that the tax burden on ordinary families was half what it had been in 1997, with only one interruption: "OK".

In the first two weeks of the campaign, Labour spokesmen had a total of 37 minutes 49 seconds to make their economic case, compared to just 16 minutes 30 seconds for the Conservatives.

In a seemingly tough interview his key questions were not pursued. For example, James Naughtie asked: *"Can you name a single serious economic commentator who doesn't believe that Labour's plans for the third term would entail tax rises?"* Alan Milburn side-stepped the question and moved to an attack on Conservative policy and its £35 billion of cuts; James Naughtie responded with: "Here we go again". This, though clearly intended as irreverent, was hardly the finest way of holding a government minister to account.

James Naughtie then allowed Alan Milburn to override several of his attempts to interject, letting him spell out at some length the alleged damage a Conservative Government would do to public services. While Alan Milburn had been given ample time to defend both his party's economic policy and to attack that of the Conservatives, he had been let off the hook in relation to the IFS report.

1 APRIL: OLIVER LETWIN V GORDON BROWN

The next day, James Naughtie conducted Today's first campaign interviews with Gordon Brown and his counterpart, Oliver Letwin. He first observed to Oliver Letwin:

James Naughtie: It is clear that Labour intends to make the economy the centre piece of its election launch and the Conservatives say they welcome that because they argue that the Chancellor's record is much less rosy than Labour makes it appear.

His first question invited a response to Alan Milburn's rebuttal of the IFS report the day before. But Oliver Letwin had only 30 seconds on this before James Naughtie abruptly moved him on to the feasibility of Conservative spending cuts:

James Naughtie: Where does this take us? Because it seems there's embarrassment all round, doesn't there?... You've got going on the 35 billion figure that Labour used and they sometimes find it difficult to justify that and the terms that its used in their campaign.

Oliver Letwin: ...It's them not...

James Naughtie: Yes, you've accused them yesterday of effectively sort of trying to fiddle these figures by the way Mr Milburn explained them away. On the other hand of course they turn to you and use the magic words 'Howard Flight', your old colleague who stood up and said 'Well of course after the election we're going for much more cutting than we can say now', effectively that's the way it was interpreted, so really everybody's got a problem including you, haven't they?

In total, the interview lasted 5 minutes and 18 seconds. Over these important two days, during which the Today programme had stated that the economy was the main battleground, this was the only chance given to Conservatives to stake their claims. It also turned out to be Oliver Letwin's only opportunity to comment on the IFS report and to rebut Alan Milburn's interpretation of the report's findings.

Gordon Brown was also due on the programme. In view of this, James Naughtie's decision to move Oliver Letwin's interview off the economy to an attack on the Conservative's assault on bureaucracy was surprising:

James Naughtie: The trouble is when you start defining it, you see, you say bureaucracy and regulation on schools, everyone is now getting terribly excited about telling schools what they should put in school dinners. Now is that good regulation or bad regulation?"

Oliver Letwin, unlike Alan Milburn, and Gordon Brown in the interview later in the same programme, was at pains to answer directly James Naughtie's questions. That was his choice. But it meant that, whereas the two Labour ministers were not held to account, Oliver Letwin was. This created imbalance in the treatment between the parties.

The interview with Gordon Brown at 8.15am was preceded by a scene-setting package from Evan Davies. Evan Davis, rather than exploring (for example) doubts about the Chancellor's policies, which had been expressed by bodies such as the IFS, or their tax implications, instead embarked on a three minute exegesis on the problems of using and trusting economic statistics. While he mentioned that "*recently, even the Chancellor has had some statistical problems for talking of £35 billion of Tory spending cuts*", and that "*they still haven't explained what they mean by 'cuts' or what they mean by '£35 billion'*", he neither challenged Gordon Brown's claims nor set out the Conservative rebuttal.

James Naughtie did ask the Chancellor about Alan Milburn's response to the IFS figures:

James Naughtie: Do you agree with Mr Milburn that the best way of interpreting those was to remove the self-employed from the data?

Gordon Brown: The self-employed rely on profits from their businesses, and this was a year, in which – as we saw around the world – we had economic growth relatively low...

The Chancellor then went on for a further minute, ignoring the question and listing his economic achievements. Then James Naughtie tried again:

James Naughtie: The point about Mr Milburn yesterday was that he appeared to be trying to massage these figures in a direction that would make them... sorry, before you interrupt, better for the government.

Gordon Brown again avoided the question:

Gordon Brown: The typical family – that's the family on median income – has seen a rise in their living standards after tax and after inflation, every year since 1997.

The Chancellor was then given the time to describe how he could afford spending on public services because "*we have growth in the economy*".

Instead of persisting in questioning the Chancellor on either the IFS report or Alan Milburn's attempt to reinterpret the figures, James Naughtie moved to the Chancellor's £35 billion spending cuts allegation. His potentially tough question, contending that the calculation on which it was based was bogus, was fielded by Gordon Brown who asserted:

Gordon Brown: That is £35 billion less, and it's not me that's saying that, that's the Conservative Party.

He then detailed what that would entail year by year, culminating with £35 billion in year six. He then repeated himself. James Naughtie did not intervene. The Chancellor went on triumphantly:

Gordon Brown: [it is my] duty to point out to the electorate the difference between us and the Conservatives... that we have spending plans that will enable us to finance health, education and public

services, and they have spending plans which mean very substantial cuts in the basic services which people rely on, including pensioners.

James Naughtie: What are you announcing today, and how can you expect people to believe that this can be afforded without tax increases after the election?

Again, Gordon Brown did not answer and James Naughtie made no effort to pursue the point. There was no sign of the single minded tenacity that he had shown in his interview with Oliver Letwin.

In the final four minutes of the interview, responding to easy questions, Gordon Brown put forward, unchallenged and uninterrupted, his own plans for the economic management of the country, his ambitious housing plans, benefits for pensioners, the Lyons review, council tax reforms, finishing for good measure on an electioneering stand:

Gordon Brown: Now, that could not happen if you have the series of cuts that I've just outlined from the Conservative Party, or if Mr Howard Flight says secret plans were adopted by the Conservative Party.

This interview had lasted in total for more than 11 minutes 15 seconds, James Naughtie's questions taking 30% of the time. In the 5 minutes 18 seconds with Oliver Letwin, they took 40%.

12 APRIL

12 April was the day after the launch of the Conservative Manifesto and the day before the launch of the Labour Manifesto itself. It was also the day on which Tony Blair and Gordon Brown published a dossier attacking the Conservative's economic proposals.

In a slot early that morning, Political Correspondent Norman Smith said that: *"Labour is going to publish a detailed document, a dossier, if you're allowed to call it that, detailing the Tory spending plans, and carrying out what they say will be a forensic dissection of the Tory plans, the aim being obviously to shred the Tories' economic credibility and thereby to hope that they damage the Tories' credibility more broadly."* He also warned that this looked like an attempt at news management.¹¹ But despite this and other warnings that Labour was embarked on a spoiling tactic,¹² Today made it their lead story in interviews with Ed Balls

¹¹ "I suppose the hard part of this is they've been going on about this really for four or five days now, and they have not yet managed to bulldoze the political agenda onto their terrain. ...that's the hard part for Labour, they're coming out with all these details, but it's very hard to report and it's very hard for the electorate to get their head round."

¹² Labour's plan to hold a "Tory demolition day" of its economic policy had been exposed the previous Sunday (10 April) in the *Sunday Times*. David Cracknell and

at 7.10 am (a senior adviser to Gordon Brown and Labour parliamentary candidate), Oliver Letwin at 8.10 am; and in Andrew Marr's wrap-up at the end of the programme.

The first interview of the programme was with Ed Balls, conducted by John Humphrys, who pursued the line that Labour now appeared to be making the allegations that were contradictory (that the Conservatives were planning both to cut and raise public spending). He observed:

John Humphrys: Labour says we must not elect a Conservative government, because it will cut spending so savagely, our public services will be destroyed... So, what's this? A Labour candidate suggesting the Tories would actually spend more than Labour. And not just any old candidate. Ed Balls, Gordon Brown's chief economic adviser, and right-hand man until he decided he wanted a seat in parliament for himself. Mr Balls, what is going on here?

Despite this tough introduction, this was not a hard interview. John Humphrys interjections were unsuccessful; four times Ed Balls overrode him before John Humphrys could get to ask his next question. He was allowed to side-step the substantive issue – of whether the Conservatives would, according to Labour, be spending more or less on public services after five years. He was also able to reiterate the allegation of the £35 billion tax cuts while adding further claims that the Conservatives would have an £18 billion 'black hole' by the end of their first year in office and would be spending hugely less on hospitals and schools.

The interview with Oliver Letwin was preceded by a highly critical report. Unlike the previous interview with Gordon Brown, this attacked the credibility of Conservative economic plans.

The interview later that morning with Oliver Letwin was preceded by a special report by Iain Watson. Unlike the piece preceding the Gordon Brown interview by Evan Davies the previous week, this attacked the credibility of Conservative economic plans. This lead-in is quoted in full:

John Humphrys Lies, damned lies, and statistics – if Disraeli's famous phrase has become a cliché, that's because its essential truth is always being refreshed. Especially every time we have an election. The main

Andrew Porter had revealed that: "Amid concern that the Conservatives may win votes with carefully targeted promises such as council tax and inheritance tax cuts, Labour will devote a whole day to an attempt to bulldoze its rival's economic plan... Privately Labour officials are concerned that they will have nothing to say during the campaign on cutting taxes. They acknowledge that their plans to boost spending on health and education will inevitably lead to tax rises."

parties announce their tax and spending plans, and their opponents say they don't add up, and they produce a mass of statistics to prove it. Today, Labour are promising – threatening – a document they say will destroy the Tories' policies, but they, the Tories, say Labour has a black hole in its finances so big you could lose a planet in it, and taxes will have to soar if Tony Blair wins the election. Well, I'll be speaking to the shadow chancellor, Oliver Letwin in a moment, but first Iain Watson's with us, he's been looking at the Conservative claims that their spending policy has, in effect, been given the all-clear by various respected independent bodies. Iain, what have you found?"

Iain Watson: Well, I think the election campaign was characterised yesterday by claim and counter-claim about each parties' spending plans, and the Conservatives, to some extent have been deploying – if not a human shield – a kind of statistical shield, if I can say that, and hiding behind these kind of assurances that their plans had all been given a seal of approval by the independent Institute of Fiscal Studies. This is what the Conservative leader Michael Howard said, and then what his policy co-ordinator David Cameron said yesterday.

Michael Howard: The independent Institute of Fiscal Studies has made it absolutely clear that our plans stack up, we can cut taxes by £4 billion in our first budget.

David Cameron: We've produced costed figures for an entire parliament for our spending, they've been looked at by the independent Institute of Fiscal Studies, who've backed them up entirely.

Iain Watson: Well, we obviously contacted the Institute of Fiscal Studies to find out exactly what they did say, and the good news for the Conservatives is that they do believe that they can cut taxes by £4 billion as Michael Howard was suggesting there. But in a recent budget document they added an important caveat, and I'm afraid I'm going to read that section out. It says 'The Conservatives have explained in detail how they intend to achieve a net £12 billion cut in spending by 2007/8, partly by slimming the role of government, partly through efficiency savings.' That's so far so good. But it goes on and says, 'it cannot be guaranteed that these plans will achieve the savings claimed for them, or if they can, over what timescale'. So I then spoke to their public spending expert at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Carl Emmerson. Now, the Conservatives base their savings in public spending on the David James review, but the IFS say that apart from the section on pensions, they haven't looked at this in any detail, so they can't possibly endorse his findings.

Carl Emmerson: What we've said is that if the spending totals implied by the James Review and what it implies for each government department are kept to, that the Conservatives can afford their

tax plans. We have not looked in detail at the different components of the James Review. That is to say, in the other areas of public services such as the Home Office, education, health etcetera, you'd need to be an expert in every single area of public spending, in order to assert whether the James Review in its entirety could be delivered. We have not come up with an answer to the question, 'how good would public services be in 2007/8, if the Conservatives implemented those plans', or even if those plans could be implemented.¹³

Iain Watson: Well, we then spoke to a management consultant Jerry Lynch, he advises companies how to restructure or – to put I bluntly – to slim down and reduce staff. He runs a website called HR Manager UK. Now, if you go to that site, you'll see that he looks in detail at both the government's review of waste, the Gershon Review, and the Conservative version that we've been hearing about, the James Review. And I have to say, that he just wasn't very impressed by what he'd seen.

Jerry Lynch: The information we have on the James Review is very sparse. The James Review consists of a Powerpoint slide presentation. If I presented that to a senior businessman in a company, I would be laughed out of the company, I think. On top of that, we don't know the methodology they adopted. James is grossly overstating the savings that are going to be made. It's extremely expensive to make civil servants redundant. We don't know whether he will be able to deliver asset sales on the scale that he's proposing. But when you look at the time scales for making civil servants redundant, then to vacate offices for asset sales is going to take several years. We're talking about a very long time to make any substantial savings.

Iain Watson: Now, he tells me he's not a member of any political party. He did have a brief flirtation with the Lib Dems a few years ago, but he insists all that is over, and his comments are professional and not political. On the political front, of course, Labour are going to launch an attack – a demolition, as they call it – on the Conservative spending plans, so I'm afraid we're going to have more claim and counterclaim throughout the day.

John Humphrys' manner, stern and persistent, was in sharp contrast to that shown to Ed Balls earlier. He opened:

John Humphrys: I suppose you had better apologise Mr Letwin for somewhat misrepresenting what the IFS has said.

¹³ It is striking that, in its interviews with Alan Milburn and Gordon Brown, the programme had chosen to ignore a report earlier this year by the IFS that there was an £11 billion tax shortfall in Labour's projections.

In the interview that followed, Oliver Letwin was not once let off the rack. Over eight questions John Humphrys tenaciously reminded of him of Michael Howard's, David Cameron's and Carl Emmerson's comments, and again alleged that they had not been telling the truth:

John Humphrys: Well, that is not true, they have been looked at by the independent IFS, who back them up entirely. That is not true, the IFS have you have just heard from Mr Emmerson do not back them up entirely.

Oliver Letwin: Well, you have asked them whether they've done something we've never asserted that they have done or could do...

There were three more questions in this vein before John Humphrys moved on to argue, over seven questions, that no savings could be made from cutting waste. The next seven focused on the unfeasibility of Conservative port controls policy.¹⁴ A final sequence of eight questions referred to a case of alleged doctoring of election photographs by a Tory candidate. They were designed to establish whether the process had been sanctioned centrally, and could therefore be regarded as a matter of doubtful tactics. The weight attached to the matter suggested firmly that it was, despite Oliver Letwin's denials.

John Humphrys' questions to Oliver Letwin took 41% of the time, while in his interview with Ed Balls earlier that morning, they took 28%.

13 APRIL

Later that morning, the Labour Party was to officially launch its Manifesto. In his interview with Alan Milburn, John Humphrys started with jocular and only slightly barbed comments about the whereabouts of Tony Blair's photo in the Manifesto.

Unlike Iain Watson's introduction to the Oliver Letwin interview the day before, there was no pre-prepared set up to this interview. John Humphrys shift to the question of how Gordon Brown would properly account for his tax and spending plans was unfocused. Although John Humphrys attempted to intervene, Alan Milburn was allowed to consistently override him with party political point scoring and lists of Labour Government achievements. John Humphrys best shot in the eleven and half minutes of interview was "whether you can do that without putting up taxes substantially, and it is very difficult to find any economist anywhere, including those at the Institute of Fiscal Studies for which you have such high regard, who believe that that is possible." But he did not cross-examine him on this. He appeared not to get a chance. Nearly every time John Humphrys interjected or began to frame a question, Alan Milburn either interrupted him or talked

¹⁴ Relating back to Angus Stickler's dismissive report of the Conservative policy on this earlier that morning.

over him.¹⁵ And he had time to cast doubts over the Conservative's proposed spending cuts and finish his interview on an electioneering stand.

John Humphrys was far less dominant than he had been with Oliver Letwin the previous day. Oliver Letwin had had 11 minutes to deal with a very prepared case against him. Together Ed Balls (April 12) and Alan Milburn (April 13) had had 16 minutes in which they made their criticisms of the Conservative plans and past records plus extolling their own virtues.

On the same day that the Labour Party launched its manifesto, an IMF report which questioned the Chancellor's economic forecasts was all but ignored by the Today programme.

On the same day as Labour's manifesto launch, a potentially embarrassing report was published by the International Monetary Fund questioning whether Gordon Brown's forecasts for economic growth were plausible. Told by the IMF to hasten the pace of fiscal consolidation or cut borrowing to meet his fiscal rules Gordon Brown was reported as saying the IMF had got it wrong. Michael Howard, however, claimed it was a tax bombshell.

The next day the IMF report, which, according to *The Independent*,¹⁶ had put Labour on the defensive and propelled tax to the top of the agenda, was all but ignored by the Today programme, being consigned to the business news. As Today had declared that the Election was "about the management of the economy", this editorial decision was surprising.

¹⁵ Alan Milburn cut off John Humphrys interjections or talked over them no less than 19 times. His longest uninterrupted contribution was 195 words, averaging at 42.

¹⁶ *The Independent*, 14 April 2005.

CONCLUSION

During the opening period of the election campaign, the Today programme subjected Conservative economic claims to tough analysis – both through hard questioning and detailed investigation. It questioned the party’s integrity, and relentlessly investigated claims of black holes, spin-doctoring and over-spending. This was robust journalism in action.

The problem is that the same level of scrutiny and investigation was not applied to the Labour Party. Today invited two economic commentators to undermine Conservative credibility, but did not interview any economist to do the same with Labour. Such treatment was not isolated. It also happened during the 2004 Party Conferences, when, apart from on the subject of Iraq, Labour Party economic policy was not critically examined.

Analysis of the “election trail” reports in the first formal week of campaigning reveals similar imbalances to those detailed above. Of the 12 reports, three focused directly on Conservative manifesto promises, subjecting them to critical examination. One other cast Michael Howard and his campaign management in an unduly bad light.¹⁷ By contrast only one of Labour’s least controversial Manifesto promises was the subject of a report – the promise to introduce parish councils to urban areas – and that uncritically.

¹⁷ Detailed research and effort must have been spent drawing up the case *against* Conservative proposals for pupil passports, port controls and waste cuts without damage to necessary local services. No similar effort was observable for the Labour Party’s proposals.

Similar discrepancies appear when examining the lead stories in the national press with those that the programme decided to run with. Of two front page stories in *The Times* over these two weeks that were directly critical of the Government, the Today programme pursued neither. On 11 April, the lead story, “Labour to halt postal vote fraud but only after election” did not feature anywhere in Today’s political or election coverage – despite the scandals in Labour constituencies in Birmingham and Blackburn. On 13 April, the day of the Labour Manifesto launch, the front page of *The Times* read, “Doctors who backed Blair desert Labour”. Today did not run this story. Nor was it raised in a long interview that day with the former Health Secretary, Alan Milburn.

Of the 12 reports from the election trail, three subjected Conservative proposals to detailed scrutiny. Only one Labour Party proposal was treated similarly (and that was on the uncontroversial subject of whether to introduce parish councils to urban areas).

In contrast, at the start of the second week of the campaign, “Howard faces flak as Labour stretches poll lead” was the front page article in *The Times*. To this, Today reacted. It was the subject of the 6.32 am political two-way interview, of a stringent interview with Liam Fox, and of amused gossip by an election panel peopled by two left-of-centre journalists (Harold Evans and Piers Morgan), along with the once Labour Party card-carrying holder and now Liberal Democrat defector former Director-General of the BBC Greg Dyke.¹⁸

A paper such as this cannot demonstrate whether the BBC is systematically hostile to centre-right views. It does seem that there may be problems with one of its flagship news programmes. This is not to suggest that there is deliberate or even conscious bias. But there is evidence of weak editorial control and uneven levels of consistency and balance. Urgent action is required to put this right.

¹⁸ The Today programme has never, to the authors’ knowledge, carried a panel discussion between Charles Moore, Kelvin McKenzie and Paul Dacre.

METHODOLOGY

The BBC routinely responds to claims of bias by asserting that bias lies in the eye of the beholder. But the Corporation conducts little systematic analysis of its own output, and therefore is unable to judge the real position.

This paper has filled the gap by mounting detailed scrutiny of a range of transcripts from a flagship part of the BBC's output, the Today programme. Producer Guidelines dictate that it must be politically balanced. It is also one of the nation's agenda setters, on air for 17 hours a week. While it is impossible to cover all of the corporation's 243 hours a week of new output, it is possible to discern significant patterns from close analysis of representative periods of such flagship output.

The methodology is to log, time and tabulate all items, note their subject matter, the editorial angle and breakdown of items – presenter introduction, political correspondent report or two way, politician or political commentator interview for example – and to quantify the degree of confrontation and critical scrutiny in the conduct of each political interview. While there is no agreed methodology for such analysis, this is as rigorous as most studies, if not more so.