

Summary - BBC Today programme January 30 - February 1, 2001

"The implications of withdrawal from the EU"

The BBC Today programme broadcast several items between January 30 and February 1 on the topic of withdrawal from the EU. There were three special reports by Sarah Nelson, run on consecutive days starting January 30, followed on February 1 itself by a special edition of the programme anchored from Brussels by Edward Stourton. The items carried that day included the results of a specially-commissioned Today poll on attitudes to EU membership, along with interviews with three EU commissioners (Kinnock, Patten and Bolkestein), the UK foreign secretary Robin Cook, and a wide variety of politicians, drawn from Europhile, Euro-sceptic and the Withdrawal camps.

This unusual approach appeared to be a special attempt to ensure that the Corporation met the objectives in the European debate outlined by Mark Damazer, the assistant managing director of news and current affairs, on the February 1 programme:

to make certain that a wide range of voices are heard on our relationship with the European Union.

Yet analysis of what was actually broadcast indicates that this aim was not met. The programme scarcely covered the case for withdrawal, despite saying it would. In the event, just one voice - that of Nigel Farage of UKIP - was heard putting the arguments for withdrawal. He was allowed only five sentences on the theme. Two other pro-withdrawal politicians invited to contribute - Christopher Gill MP and Lord Pearson of Rannoch - were edited to the point where their case for withdrawal was not heard.

Further, although the poll done specially for the BBC suggested that 30% of Britons wished to do so, there was no analysis of this finding, other than by BBC correspondents and those who sought to minimise its importance, such as Robin Cook and Chris Patten. Both these were specifically asked questions about the poll, but there was no comparative interview with someone in favour of withdrawal. Nor was there any attempt to illustrate or analyse who was articulating the withdrawal views, and on what they were based.

The handling of the poll by the BBC correspondents Gordon Carrera and Sarah Nelson was that its results should be viewed with caution, that very few politicians shared similar views, and that it was unlikely that the issue of "Europe" would influence the outcome of the next election.

The series of three packages by Sarah Nelson purported to cover the case for withdrawal from the political, economic and cultural perspectives. In the event, they, too, scarcely touched upon it. The only voice in favour was a businessman, Mike Fisher, who appeared to be against Europe because of bureaucracy. The politician chosen to put the case for reducing our involvement with the EU was Bill Cash, who, Ms Nelson emphasised, refused to even imagine withdrawal because it was "fanciful".

Other language chosen to describe withdrawal, and therefore apparently endorsed by BBC reporters, was that it would lead to "isolation on the fringes of Europe", was a lonely political path to tread, and was "flat-earth politics". All these are views strongly pushed by opponents of withdrawal, and as such, would have been fine to use if there had been countervailing words and views. But there were not, apart from the few from Mr Farage.

The programme did carry arguments from Euro-sceptics, such as Edward Macmillan Scott, Charles Moore, William Cash and Conrad Black, none of whom favour leaving the EU. Between them, they eloquently argued that Britain's interests might best be served by reducing the UK's commitment to Europe, renegotiating the treaties and joining NAFTA. But these all fell significantly short of being the case for withdrawal itself. Edward Macmillan Scott, when asked, pointedly described withdrawal views as "extremist".

Choosing Euro-sceptics to make the 'come-out' case with which they do not actually agree does not seem to fit in with Mr Damazer's objectives outlined above.

Further, the arguments of those who favour withdrawal were conspicuous by their absence. There was nothing, for example, about fears of federalism and the development of the superstate, and nothing on the alleged failures and waste of the Common Agricultural and Fisheries policies. Equally, no effort was made

to look at the case for a free trade agreement with the EU, as an alternative to membership, which those who espouse withdrawal believe could be easily achieved. And there was no analysis at all of the views of the political left about withdrawal - for example, those of Lord Stoddart of Swindon, or of the Green party's belief that the EU represents the triumph of global capitalism.

For Today - and the BBC - the conundrum therefore remains of how properly to cover the whole debate about Europe. There is a substantial strand of opinion, particularly outside Parliament, but also within it, that favours withdrawal. Despite Robin Cook's assertions of its unimportance, that number remains remarkably consistent in the 30-40% band. At the moment, very little articulation is being given to those views.

On this evidence, it appears that those who espouse withdrawal will have real difficulty ever achieving an effective platform on one of the nation's main arenas of political debate. Today remains centrally focused on the views of the politicians at Westminster, and on this showing, seems hardly capable of moving outside it.

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Note: Minotaur Media Tracking is an independent broadcast monitoring company, commissioned in this instance by Global Britain to assess this part of the output of the Today programme. The principals of the company are David Keighley, former director of corporate affairs at TV-am, and Kathy Gynge, formerly a current affairs producer at LWT and head of feature programmes at TV-am.