

# About 4 Broadcasters' Liaison Group (BLG) meeting, 11 January 2005

## Note of conclusions and action points

### Minutes

#### Present

Eleanor Aitken (BBC Scotland), Andrew Colman (BBC Northern Ireland), Nerys Hopkins (S4C), David Jordan (BBC) (chair), Peter Lowe (BSkyB), Ian McBride (ITV), Rob Morrison (UTV), Prash Naik (Channel 4), Nick Powell (HTV), Ian Pratt (BBC Wales), Huw Roberts (BBC Wales), Rob Shepherd (BBC), Martin Stott (Five), Derrick Thomson (SMG), Nick Toon (Channel 4).

#### In attendance

Jane Harris (Electoral Commission), Tabby Karamat (BBC), Jaron Lewis (BBC), Steve Perkins (Ofcom).

#### Venue

66 Portland Place, London

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## 1. Extranet

The group planned to set-up an Extranet site accessible by the political parties which would include information from the broadcasters about PEBs including contact details, allocations, technical specifications and delivery requirements.

## 2. Meetings with political parties

The group had invited representatives from three of the political parties who will be standing candidates at elections in 2005. A further meeting will be held soon with the other political parties that are likely to qualify for a PEB.

The main purpose of the meeting was to canvass the views of the parties about how PEB slots are allocated during the 2005 elections, and in particular any forthcoming General Election.

Meetings were held with the parties as follows:

1. The Liberal Democrats (David Walter and Lord Rennard)
2. The Conservative Party (Guy Black and Michael Salter)
3. The Labour Party (Matthew Doyle)

At the start of each meeting, the Chair explained that the BLG was an informal group that met to assist the broadcasters in considering the issues arising out of PEBs. It was explained that the group does not itself take decisions: these are still taken by the individual broadcasters. The Chair explained that the purpose of the meeting was to hear views from the parties about the PEB system generally and to discuss views on how they should be allocated in the forthcoming General Election.

Similar issues were raised by each of the parties.

## (a) The 2004 European/Local Elections

The parties generally felt that PEBs for these elections had gone well. One party thought the major parties should have had more PEBs and that they also should have received more than one PEB for the Mayoral elections.

## (b) Allocation

The Liberal Democrats asked for parity between the major parties with an equal (5:5:5 or 4:4:4) allocation. The Conservatives and Labour asked for the status quo to be maintained. The Liberal Democrats gave a number of reasons in support of their request, which included reference to the allocation at previous elections and past and present levels of electoral support. This issue is to be followed-up in correspondence. It was noted that the allocation might not be the same in England as in Wales and Scotland where there are four main parties.

## (c) Duration

One party welcomed maintaining the 2'40", 3'40" or 4'40" required durations. Another asked for the possibility of having 1'30" PEBs, but more of them. Ofcom said the rules on PEB duration for commercial broadcasters were unlikely to change before the General Election. It was noted that if they were changed this might cause scheduling problems. It was agreed to keep this subject under review.

## (d) Scheduling

It was noted that PEBs were now generally being broadcast earlier in the evening (between 6–7 pm) in response to requests from political parties. One party argued that many voters (particularly in London) were commuting at this time and asked for the PEBs to be broadcast between 7–10 pm. Another asked for them to be shown more than once across the day to maximise audience. The broadcasters explained that, for practical reasons, PEBs needed to be shown around news programmes to enable the broadcasters to easily provide for national variation. PEBs were broadcast in the evening to maximise audience. This subject would be kept under review.

## (e) Radio

Two parties said that more radio stations should carry PEBs, both in the commercial sector and the BBC. Ofcom confirmed that it would be reviewing the position with commercial radio. It was noted that the BBC carried formal PEBs on BBC Radio 2 and

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BBC Radio 4 and that BBC Radio 1 carried broadcasts in a different form.

that any problems with their PEB can be resolved so that they do not forfeit their slot.

### (f) Moving Footage of Opponents

Two parties raised the policy of not permitting parties from using actuality (moving images or audio) of their opponents. One party had a strong objection to this policy. Another thought the material should be allowed to be used to allow parties to keep PEBs interesting. It was noted that photographs and quotations were permissible under the existing rules. The broadcasters explained the rationale behind the policy. It was agreed that this was something that the Group and each broadcaster would give further consideration.

The group and individual broadcasters will consider these issues further once it has met with the other political parties likely to qualify for a PEB.

### 3. Broadcast Intros/Outros

Earlier in the year the Electoral Commission had started a project to devise new introduction and end sequences for PEBs. The broadcasters have been co-operating with this process. The Electoral Commission informed the group that it did not have the budget to be able to continue with this initiative during this financial year. It was accepted that this meant it was unlikely that new sequences could be agreed and produced in advance of a May General Election.

### (g) Use of Parliamentary Footage

This restriction has been imposed by the Houses of Parliament. The BBC agreed to raise this with the authorities.

Two suggestions for a new Intro/Outro sequence for PEBs were discussed by the group. Storyboards were commissioned to allow the group to consider the suggestions further at a future meeting.

### (h) Digital Television Channels

Parties asked whether some digital television channels should be compelled to carry PEBs/PPBs. It was noted that Sky broadcasts some PEBs voluntarily. Ofcom is considering this issue further.

### (i) English regional broadcasts

One party asked if it was possible for the BBC and ITV to offer different broadcasts in each English broadcast region. The relevant broadcasters were of the view that this would be technically complicated and potentially expensive. There would also be problems because the BBC and ITV transmission areas are different and do not mirror electoral boundaries.

### (j) Party Political Broadcasts

One party asked if the timing of PPBs should be for the parties to decide rather than having them linked to events such as the Queen's speech.

### (k) Timing/Delivery to Broadcasters

The group reiterated that parties needed to get PEBs to them 24 hours in advance. If a broadcaster delivers after this, it does so at its own risk. It was noted that the rule was there in part for the smaller parties to ensure