

A democratic alternative to the monarchy

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Mr Chris Patten
Chair, BBC Trust
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Dear Mr Patten

You will be aware that the BBC has a legal duty to "do all it can to ensure that controversial subjects are treated with due accuracy and impartiality", "ensure a wide range of significant views and perspectives are given due weight and prominence" and clearly distinguish opinion from fact. On most controversial subjects the corporation fulfils these duties admirably. But there is one issue with which they are continually and deliberately breached - the monarchy.

The BBC's coverage of the monarchy and the royal family is widely accepted, even by the corporation's own staff, to be deferential, frivolous and devoid of journalistic standards. It aims to celebrate and promote the monarchy, rather than present the facts about it. Such an approach might be appropriate for coverage of sport, entertainment or charity events, but the monarchy is by its very nature political. It is a highly contested and controversial institution, a core part of our constitution and the power structures that exist in this country.

The upcoming diamond jubilee has exacerbated this pro-monarchy bias, and the 'Diamond Queen' series, presented by Andrew Marr, is perhaps the most egregious example so far. What was presented as a piece of biographical journalism was in fact pro-monarchy polemic. Mr Marr clearly set out to advance one political viewpoint (monarchism) while discrediting another competing viewpoint (democratic republicanism).

Republican perspectives on the Queen's reign or criticism of her record were almost entirely absent, while controversial and contested opinions about the monarchy's value were presented as fact. On a number of occasions both presenter and interviewees made claims that were patently untrue. Some specific examples are listed below:

- The programme contained no British republicans putting forward the case for an elected head of state or contesting claims made in the programme about the value of the monarchy. Indeed, the British republican movement was not mentioned at all. Out of a total of three hours, Professor John Warhust of the Australian Republican Movement was given just 25 seconds to argue his case.
- The only constitutional expert interviewed by Marr is Peter Hennessy, whose enthusiastic support for the monarchy and devotion to the Queen are well known. There are many constitutional analysts and academics – not all republicans, by any means - who would take issue with Hennessy's assertions. Why were their views not heard?



- Marr continually contrasts elected politicians with the Queen, suggesting she is more valued and more important than holders of elected office. 'Other countries ... [have] a clapped out politician called a president,' he says at one point. This is a tired monarchist cliché that could be easily countered by explaining the benefits of having an elected and accountable head of state (not least the constitutional safeguards it would bring).
- Marr makes various comments on the 'value' of having a Queen and her role within the constitution – such as her regular secret meetings with the prime minister – in a manner that is entirely favourable to the monarchy and the status quo. No questions are raised about whether or not her role in our political system is appropriate.
- In seeking to make a positive contrast with presidents Marr claims: 'the US has 'an elected leader whose powers are far greater than any king or queen has ever had.' This is utter nonsense: the US president has his powers clearly prescribed by the US constitution and is less powerful in domestic affairs than the British prime minister, who gains much of his authority from the Crown.
- The programme was full of baseless, and at times absurd, assertions. At one point the British Ambassador to UAE strongly implies that the Britain would be more vulnerable to terrorism without the royal family. This extraordinary claim goes unchallenged and uncorroborated.
- Marr continually repeats the common misconception that the royal family works hard: 'Most days of the year the entire working royal family are spread around the country, from town halls to schools and hospitals and charities they've personally chosen to support.' This is simply untrue – it is a matter of public record that members of the royal family only work for a third of the year. The most cursory glance at the court circular would have told the programme's researchers this.
- The brief section on royal funding and finances was so misleading it could deservedly be called propaganda. Marr stresses that the Queen voluntarily pays income tax, for example, but fails to add that she refuses to disclose at what rate.
- At another point Marr says 'It's been estimated that every year the monarchy costs each of us about half the price of a cup of coffee at a high street chain,' neglecting to tell the viewer that the estimate was calculated by the Palace. No mention is made of the hidden costs such as security, lost revenues from the Duchies and expenditure by local councils.
- Marr then interviews Gus O'Donnell, who claims that 'if you look at those countries with presidencies, it turns out they spend almost as much, if not more, in some cases, than we do'. Again, this is simply untrue – the presidents of Germany, Finland, Austria and Ireland are all demonstrably less expensive than the British monarchy. Only the French president costs more, and that is not a comparable system to the monarchy. In fact, once hidden costs are included, the cost of the British monarchy is likely to be over 100 times that of the Irish president.
- Spurious claims and urban myths are repeated as fact throughout the series. Marr says that a third of the world's population watched the royal wedding, for example, a claim that has been comprehensively debunked. For this figure to be accurate, the royal wedding would have to have been 600 times popular in India than the most popular television event in the country's history (the 2011 cricket world cup match between India and Sri Lanka).

The programme lacked any journalistic merit or integrity; it was from start to finish a promotional piece that would be indistinguishable from anything made by the palace itself.

I should stress at this point that this is not a simple complaint about a single programme, the Marr documentary is the latest and most provocative example of a long-standing pattern of behaviour at the BBC in reporting on the monarchy. The very obvious bias in royal reporting and the corporation's clear desire to celebrate the monarchy is evident across its output, whether on TV, radio or online. Last year the BBC website carried endless 'reports' on the royal wedding that had little journalistic merit and which served only to promote the royals in a positive light.

While there has been some discussion on local radio and on Radio 4 most of the BBC's flagship programmes, such as BBC Breakfast, the Six and Ten O'clock News and the Today programme have almost entirely ignored all dissenting views on this issue. On the few occasions these programmes have

acknowledged dissent they have done so on their terms: last year, in the run up to the wedding, the Today programme contacted me keen to run a story about 'how this was a bad time for republicans'. When I explained that it was quite the opposite, that the wedding presented huge opportunities for republicans and that Republic was gaining thousands of new members, interest from the programme evaporated. Instead the editors decided to run a piece written by a celebrity which said it was indeed a bad time for us – despite the evidence to the contrary. This year the BBC seems to have allowed itself to be entirely co-opted by the palace to the extent that it will be joining in the celebrations in early June, rather than simply reporting them, while in the meantime feeding viewers and listeners with an almost daily diet of positive royal stories.

The BBC frequently responds to republican complaints by claiming that balance is achieved "over time", but that promise has never been fulfilled and is at any rate completely unacceptable. The Marr programme, for example, was a highly publicised, prime time television show on BBC1, watched by an estimated 6m people. Viewers will understandably give Mr Marr's opinions – and those of his monarchist interviewees – special weight, especially as he was once associated with serious journalism. The distortions, half-truths and fabrications presented in the programme will not be "balanced" by tokenistic interviews with republicans elsewhere in the BBC's output.

I would also stress that this is not simply about getting republicans on TV and on the radio, it is about the BBC's lack of balance in all its coverage of the monarchy. While an intelligent inclusion of diverse views is necessary it is also important that all reporting is done in a manner that is not supportive or celebratory of the monarchy and which is skeptical and analytical about claims made about the monarchy. The BBC's role is to remain absolutely impartial and to present the facts, but it now seems there is now no meaningful distinction between the corporation and the Buckingham Palace press office. The corporation has seriously misled viewers, silenced dissenting voices and shielded our head of state from any genuine scrutiny.

We have been forced to take our complaint directly to you, as BBC executives seem unable to grasp why the monarchy is controversial. Many complaints have been made via the corporation's opaque complaints system without any satisfactory response. We have previously written to Mark Thompson only to have our concerns dismissed out of hand without any consideration of the evidence. Last year my colleagues and I met with Helen Boaden (head of news) and David Jordan (director, editorial policy and standards) to discuss our concerns, but since then the corporation has singularly failed to address them. In fact, the bias has become even more pronounced. I am therefore asking you to take on this issue personally, to ensure that BBC executives, journalists and editors are aware of their obligations in this matter and to ensure that there is no inappropriate relationship between the BBC and the palace. I would also ask that you pursue the matter of the Marr programme with the director general, to find out how such an overtly biased piece of broadcasting was ever allowed onto the airwaves.

One simple way to deal with the problem is to re-categorise the monarchy as a 'controversial subject' within the BBC's editorial guidelines. This issue quite clearly meets the corporation's own criteria for such subjects: around a quarter of the population want the monarchy abolished, including many MPs; when the issue is discussed on air, as it is from time to time on BBC local radio, it provokes considerable debate. The issue is often topical and deals with significant issues concerning our democracy and public spending; it is of a more sensitive nature in certain regions and nations of the country, carrying important connotations within the context of various nationalist movements; and it is clearly a serious subject, debated by politicians, academics and lawyers.

In light of the issues I have raised I am asking the following:

1. That the BBC conducts an investigation into the Andrew Marr programme mentioned above, to determine what editorial and journalistic decisions were taken that led to such a biased piece of broadcasting;
2. That the BBC publicly commits to reforming its ways and to reporting, not promoting the monarchy;
3. That the BBC categorises the monarchy as a controversial subject and treats it accordingly in the future;
4. That the BBC scraps the role of royal liaison officer, a position that suggests an inappropriately cosy relationship between broadcaster and palace.

This is a direct appeal to you, as chairman of the BBC Trust, to tackle this issue with some urgency. I would welcome an opportunity to meet with you to discuss these matters further.

Yours sincerely

Graham Smith
Chief Executive Officer
Republic