

*A democratic alternative to the monarchy*

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BBC Trust Editorial Standards Committee  
180 Great Portland Street  
London W1W 5QZ

20 June 2011

To whom it may concern:

I am writing to make a formal complaint to the ESC regarding the BBC's biased coverage of the royal wedding. The complaint is made on behalf of Republic's members and supporters, and the fifth of the UK population whose views we represent.

Our complaint can be summarised as follows:

- The tiny proportion of coverage given to republican views during the wedding did not reflect the relatively high level of support for republicanism in the UK.
- When republican views were covered it was in an unremittingly negative light, using offensive, outdated stereotypes and a disparaging tone.
- The volume and tone of the royal wedding coverage was grossly disproportionate to the level of genuine interest in the event.
- The coverage was characterised by a complete absence of journalistic scrutiny, with spurious and controversial pro-monarchy claims going unchallenged.
- The vast majority of programmes and articles relating to the royal wedding were produced from a totally partisan position and a monarchist perspective.
- The BBC gave undue and powerful credence to the argument that the wedding guaranteed the future of the monarchy.

As the BBC's own Raymond Snoddy admitted: "much of the coverage was fawning and irredeemably trivial ... It was an event that was ring-fenced with normally tough journalists asking no questions, certainly not tough questions."

In our opinion the BBC has breached its legal duty (set out in its Agreement with the Secretary of State for Culture, presented to Parliament in 2006) 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. Furthermore, through its coverage of the royal wedding the BBC has appeared to express its own (pro-monarchy) opinion – again in contravention of its legal obligations. These breaches occurred continually over a sustained period, and were exacerbated by the repeated transmission of material.

The only conclusion we can draw is that the BBC took an editorial decision to ensure coverage of the wedding was overwhelmingly pro-monarchy in tone and in line with the royal household's public relations strategy. By breaching the Agreement in this way, the BBC has implied that monarchism, in reality a highly contested political viewpoint, is uncontroversial and universal.



Representatives of Republic, including Professor Roy Greenslade of City University and me, met with David Jordan and Helen Boaden to discuss these concerns in March. Unfortunately, the BBC's coverage since then has continued to lack balance and impartiality and we feel it necessary to take our complaint directly to the Trust's Editorial Standards Committee.

The lack of appreciation among BBC executives as to why the monarchy could be considered controversial clearly requires lengthy explanation. It is for this reason that the complaint exceeds 1,000 words.

Yours sincerely

Graham Smith  
Executive Officer  
Republic

# Republic complaint to BBC Trust Editorial Standards Committee

## About Republic

1. Republic is a membership-based pressure group which campaigns for a democratically accountable Head of State and an end to any constitutional role for the Royal Family. We advocate keeping our Parliamentary democracy but replacing the unelected monarchy with a directly elected, ceremonial Head of State. Our membership is diverse and represents a full social and political spectrum. We have approximately 16,000 official supporters, which include eminent lawyers, academics, MPs, journalists, entertainers and authors.

## Why coverage of the royal wedding should have been treated with "due accuracy and impartiality"

2. The royal wedding has been described, by the BBC itself, as "forging the future of the monarchy". The wedding, far from being a personal and private occasion, has been openly acknowledged by many commentators to have the purpose of increasing support for a monarchical, rather than republican, constitution and asserting the Windsor family's claim to public funding.
3. The monarchy is a political institution: it is one of the three houses of Parliament and the Crown is at the heart of the British constitution. As the think-tank Demos says:
4. The monarchy is at present an exceptionally political institution. The Crown in Parliament is the core principle upon which our un-codified constitution rests, and the monarch is responsible for various tasks including settling such issues as the selection of a prime minister, the dismissal of a parliament and the operation of the judicial system. The Queen is even required to be the ultimate political 'insider' in the UK system, with regular meetings with the prime minister. These roles are without equivalent in the constitutional and symbolic monarchies of northern Europe ...<sup>1</sup>
5. In other words, the monarchy is not simply ceremonial – it is fundamental to our constitutional arrangements, giving immense power both to the head of state personally and to politicians.
6. Quite apart from these constitutional issues, the monarchy costs taxpayers around £45m for travel, communications and property maintenance each year. Security costs, lost revenue from the Duchies of Cornwall and Lancaster and unpaid taxes bring the annual total to an estimated £202 million. The wedding has cost the taxpayer at least a further £10 million in security costs. Any institution or event supported by public funds is automatically a source of controversy, especially so given the government's current focus on deficit reduction and public sector savings.
7. This makes the wedding – at least in part – a political event. It cannot be separated from the wider debate about the future of the monarchy, the constitutional arrangements of the United Kingdom and the Windsor family's receipt of state funds. The state of that debate is summarised below.

## Public opinion on the monarchy

8.
  - Around 20-26 per cent of the population oppose the monarchy (various polls, most recently Guardian/ICM April 2011). To put this in perspective, the Liberal Democrat party's share of the vote at the last local elections was 16 per cent and the entire non-Christian religious population is 5.4 per cent (Census 2001).
  - 57 per cent believe the royal family needs to modernise more quickly (ComRes, November 2010)
  - 32 per cent thinks Britain would not be any worse off as a republic (ComRes, November 2010)
  - 62 per cent want royal finances to be subject to the same scrutiny as MPs' expenses (ICM, June 2009)
  - Over 80 per cent want the Act of Settlement reformed (ICM, March 2009)

## Debate within civil society

9. The monarchy is a constant source of debate and discussion within civil society. A range of organisations from across the political spectrum - including Democratic Audit, the Institute for Public Policy Research, The Fabian Society, Taxpayers' Alliance, Demos, Justice, Theos and Ekklesia - have published research or commented on the monarchy, with some advocating outright abolition.

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1 [www.demos.co.uk/files/modernisingthemonarchy.pdf](http://www.demos.co.uk/files/modernisingthemonarchy.pdf)

10. Furthermore, The Guardian, The Independent and The Times have all used statutory processes in attempts to obtain communications between the royal household and the government. The Guardian recently took this all the way to a tribunal with the Information Commissioner.

### **Republicanism and the monarchy in parliament**

11. Fourteen MPs from three parties formally support Republic. These include Norman Baker, a government minister, and Caroline Lucas, the leader of the (republican) Green Party.
12. A number of Early Day Motions have been tabled in the past few years, covering issues such as the royal household's exemption from the Freedom of Information Act, the civil list and the Duchy of Cornwall's accounts. Two private members bills to reform the Act of Settlement have also been introduced and debated in parliament recently.
13. The Green Party formally supports an elected head of state, and debates about the future of the monarchy continue within the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, e.g. through LabourList and Lib Dem Voice, motions at conference and fringe events. Nick Clegg's office stated before the election that the Liberal Democrat party favours shifting sovereignty from "the crown-in-parliament" to "the people-in-parliament".

### **Republicanism as a protected belief under the Equality Act**

14. A belief in a democratic alternative to the monarchy and an opposition to an hereditary, unelected monarchy constitutes a protected "belief" under the Equality Act 2010 (Grainger Plc v Nicholson [2010] IRLR 4; Hashman v Milton Park (Dorset) Ltd t/a Orchard Park [2011] EqLR 426). Republicans support and campaign for a democratically accountable Head of State and an end to any constitutional role for the Royal Family. They believe in the political and moral imperative for such change and our views are deeply held. As such, this belief constitutes a philosophical - and thus protected - belief.

### **Evidence of BBC not displaying due impartiality during coverage of the royal wedding**

#### **Republican views and perspectives not given due prominence**

15. The proportion of coverage given to republican views during the wedding did not even begin to reflect the fact that around a quarter of Britons (approximately 10-12 million adults) want to see the monarchy abolished.
16. Of approximately 400 stories about the royal wedding published on the BBC News website since November, just seven were concerned with the republican movement – most of which were highly disparaging in tone (see below).
17. During the course of the pre-wedding period there were daily discussions and items on BBC News Channel and BBC Breakfast, yet Republic (which was being approached by every major media outlet in the world for comment) received no invitations to appear on Breakfast and only one invitation to be interviewed on the News Channel.

#### **Negative portrayal of republicans and republicanism**

18. When republican views were covered it was in an unremittingly negative light. Republicans were referred to as a tiny group of "refuseniks" and "naysayers" who were "frustrated" by the wedding. The negative term "anti-monarchy" was continually used instead of the more positive "republican".
19. In a BBC news online piece entitled "Republicans' Royal Wedding Frustration", for example, reporter Gabriel Gatehouse made the baseless claim that "real, die-hard republicans are pretty difficult to come by" - a statement that is demonstrably untrue.
20. Another report, broadcast on Newsnight on April 21, asked "whatever happened to republicanism in the UK?" and was based on the assumption that opposition to the monarchy was at a historic low. (As if to underline this view, the subsequent studio debate featured two monarchists debate one republican.)

21. The Today programme called Republic's campaign manager to ask if he would appear on the programme to discuss "how this is a bad time for republicans", clearly having already drawn a conclusion before speaking to any republicans. After it was pointed out that republicans were having a very good time (through heightened campaigning, media profile and a surge in supporters) the invitation was withdrawn. In its place was an item featuring an actor reading out a piece written by Sue Townsend in which the claim that the pre-wedding period was a difficult time for republicans was repeated a number of times. Townsend was described as a 'republican campaigner' although there is no evidence she has campaigned on the issue in recent years.
22. The fact is, Republic experienced the most successful period in its history during the wedding. Its supporter base grew by around 100 per cent to 16,000 and its media profile increased dramatically. The wedding period culminated in a fun, family event in central London (the "Not the royal wedding" street party) with a very positive message of "democracy and people-power", which was attended by over 1,000 people.
23. Such offensive and inaccurate assumptions about republicans may have led to very serious factual errors, such as the BBC News website's claim that 70 "masked protesters" had been pursued by police to Republic's street party on the day of the wedding. This potentially defamatory statement was removed after a complaint from Republic, but no correction or clarification was issued.

### **Disproportionate level of coverage**

24. Neither did the coverage accurately reflect how the majority of the population – not only republicans - felt about the wedding. An ICM poll carried out for Republic in March, for example, found that 79 per cent of the public were either "largely indifferent" or "couldn't care less" about the wedding, yet the BBC's audience was constantly told that Britain was in the grip of "royal wedding fever" and experiencing a widespread sense of "excitement and anticipation".
25. The BBC certainly played a key role in ensuring that more than half of British adults (55 per cent) felt there had been too much media coverage of the wedding.<sup>2</sup> In order to produce so much content, the BBC published and broadcast an enormous number of "non-stories", which were extremely trivial with little news value. Perhaps the nadir of these was an article entitled "On being called Kate", in which journalist Kate Waters explained what it was like to be called Kate.
26. Many stories were simply repeated from the press releases of companies hoping to make money from wedding-related products and services. Examples include Camp Royale, the royal wedding-themed campsite that predicted several thousand campers and got just over a hundred, and the coach tour of Bucklebury which was eventually forced to close due to lack of interest.

### **Baseless claims repeated as fact**

27. Throughout the BBC's coverage of the wedding, a number of unsubstantiated and misleading claims were repeated as fact:
28. The figure of "two billion viewers" was repeated continually throughout the BBC's coverage of the wedding, although this has no basis in reality and has been comprehensively debunked since. (For this estimated figure to be accurate, the royal wedding would have to have been 600 per cent more popular in India than the most popular television event in its history (the 2011 cricket world cup match between India and Sri Lanka).)
29. The claim that the royal wedding would increase inbound tourism and boost the UK's economy generally was also repeated uncritically. Such claims were never interrogated despite evidence to the contrary – for example, the internal emails from VisitBritain, obtained by Republic, which showed royal weddings *negatively* affect inbound tourism.

### **Unchallenged assertions about the monarchy**

30. A number of pundits - including Ben Page of Ipsos MORI, historian Simon Schama and royal writer Katie Nicholl - appeared on BBC television claiming that the wedding had secured the future of the monarchy.

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2 <http://today.yougov.co.uk/life/royal-wedding-what-britain-public-opinion-thinks-about-prince-william-kate-middleton>

31. Schama, for example, explained that three marriages actually took place on April 29: "Kate and William. The marriage between past and future. And the marriage between the royal family and the nation." Such controversial political statements were given undue prominence and went entirely unchallenged, despite very clearly belonging to the realm of opinion rather than fact.

### **Inappropriate tone**

32. The tone of voice, inflection and body language of reporters and presenters throughout the wedding coverage was fawning and sycophantic. Journalists abandoned their usual serious and professional demeanour was appeared to be celebrate the wedding and the monarchy, rather than report the event accurately.

### **The result of these problems**

33. The impact of the BBC's lack of impartiality during the royal wedding is very significant. It has an effect on the tone of the debate about Britain's constitution, the perceived level of support for political viewpoints and the willingness with which people align themselves with such viewpoints.
34. The lack of impartiality also has the effect of excluding, offending, disparaging and marginalizing a substantial section of the British public, leaving many people with the wholly inaccurate view that they are one of only a tiny handful of people who share their views.

### **A note on the evidence**

35. It should be noted that the above evidence is not the sum total of all biased BBC output. For practical reasons and reasons of limited resources we cannot collate every example of broadcast, online and print output from the BBC which shows bias, we offer the above as a selection of evidence to support our complaint.