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*A democratic alternative to the monarchy*

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James Harding, Director of News  
BBC Broadcasting House  
Portland Place  
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14 August 2013

Dear James

I am writing to complain in the strongest terms about the BBC News Channel's coverage of the royal birth and to request a meeting to discuss it.

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. In its coverage of the royal birth, the BBC singularly failed to fulfil that duty.

Our core complaints are summarised below:

#### **Overestimating enthusiasm**

The level of coverage given by the BBC to the royal birth - two days of blanket coverage - was vastly disproportionate to public interest in the event. A poll carried out by YouGov<sup>1</sup>, for example, found that just 14% were "very interested" in the royal birth, with almost two thirds not interested. It seems that once again the BBC vastly overestimated public enthusiasm for a royal event; much the same happened with the royal wedding and jubilee. The level of coverage may have been popular with a small minority of committed royalists but for most of the country - not just republicans, by any means - it was excessive, repetitive and unnecessary.

The BBC has claimed record levels of hits on their website as a result of the royal birth, but that needs to be put into context. Firstly the BBC has not been so keen to report News Channel viewing figures which we understand were well down on previous weeks. Secondly we believe a very large proportion of the website hits were from overseas and so do not represent a level of interest from licence fee payers. Finally there is a big difference between idle curiosity and high levels of interest, the former being driven in part by the media hype, the latter clearly lacking among the wider population.

#### **Manufacturing celebration**

Perhaps sensing it had misjudged public interest in the birth, the BBC resolved to manufacture a mood of celebration. Reporters told us that the "world was waiting" and that the country was gripped by "royal baby fever" despite all evidence to the contrary. A somewhat embarrassed reporter in Bucklebury assured us that, while the town's inhabitants showed every sign of being oblivious to the birth, he could "almost hear champagne corks popping behind closed doors". Outside Buckingham Palace, Luisa Baldini

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1 [http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus\\_uploads/document/8xp56xnnvs/YG-Archive-Royal-baby-results-080713-memorabilia-and-godparents.pdf](http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/8xp56xnnvs/YG-Archive-Royal-baby-results-080713-memorabilia-and-godparents.pdf)



described a “huge crowd” before the camera panned to show around 200 people, no more than would be found on any other warm summer evening.

No doubt your producers and journalists believed this hyperbole created a more exciting viewing experience - especially after hours with no news. But it is not the BBC's job to misrepresent the facts to make a story more interesting. Whatever the motivations, the BBC misled viewers and that is unacceptable.

### **Letting myths go unchallenged**

Interviews with “royal watchers” and commentators formed the backbone of the BBC's coverage of the birth. These guests are not experts in any real sense but rather royal enthusiasts. It's unsurprising, then, that they repeat myths and misconceptions about the monarchy: that it brings in tourism, boosts the economy, costs taxpayers 63p each or has no power. These claims - which have all been debunked - went entirely unchallenged by presenters, who steadfastly avoided saying anything that could be construed as critical of the royal family.

### **Unchallenged airtime given to anti-republican pressure group**

Among the many commentators was a representative of pro-monarchy pressure group the British Monarchist Society. The BMS's aim is to defend Britain from the “moving anarchist's [*sic*] tide of a republican minority”, to “counter republican claims and arguments” and “fight against republicanism's undermining and damaging antics”<sup>2</sup>. It further pledges to “defend the Crown against republicanism, when the Crown and Her Majesty are under attack”. This is a political pressure group with a clear agenda to counter “an activist republican agenda”, yet this was not made clear to viewers and the spokesperson's assertions went unchallenged.

### **Lack of serious discussion**

A royal birth, especially when the child is third in line to throne, raises many serious questions - about our constitution, the nature of hereditary power and the rights of the new prince, for example. There was plenty of scope within the coverage to explore and reflect on these issues, bringing in a range of perspectives from across the political spectrum. Sadly, the BBC rejected this opportunity in favour of trivial chatter and idle speculation - there was no serious debate or journalism throughout two days of coverage. Your reporters may have done their best to entertain, but they didn't even attempt to inform and educate. Your audience deserves better: and it isn't just republicans who are being let down by your coverage but every licence fee payer in the country, all of whom deserve intelligent, balanced and proportionate coverage.

The monarchy is a political institution, steeped in power and vested interest. It is an institution that is contested and disputed, not just in terms of whether or not it should exist but in terms of its value, cost, influence, secrecy and modes of operation. This is the context in which a royal baby needs to be placed and this is the reason why the BBC should be treating this as much as a political news story as a celebrity or cultural story.

### **Republican views marginalised**

The overwhelming majority of guests interviewed throughout the coverage were strongly supportive of - or sympathetic to - the monarchy. Just three guests, including me, put forward explicitly republican views in that time. Unlike the claims of monarchists, our views were questioned and challenged by interviewers who worked on the assumption that the monarchy is self-evidently benign and universally adored. Opinion polls regularly find 15-20% of the population support a republic - that's around 10 million viewers whose views were almost entirely unrepresented. Polls also show that opinion about the monarchy is often ambivalent and complex and far from the unadulterated affection implied by the BBC's coverage.

It is also worth noting that while monarchist after monarchist was invited on without any other guests present who would challenge their claims, when republicans were invited on they were accompanied by a monarchist ‘in the interests of balance’. I should stress that guests should be questioned and challenged on the claims they make. Our point here isn't a criticism of the way your presenters challenged republicans but of the failure of presenters to treat monarchists in the same way. Instead their manner and responses suggested they agreed with and accepted what monarchists said, or at the very least saw nothing contentious in their claims.

The BBC has previously claimed that the monarchy is not a controversial subject and therefore does not come under its legal duty of impartiality. This position is now untenable, given the widespread debate about the BBC's

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.britishmonarchistsociety.org.uk/about-the-british-monarchist-society/>

coverage of the royal baby. It is also a position apparently contradicted by your own journalists and editors, who acknowledged this was controversial during a discussion about the coverage on the Newswatch programme.

Supporters of the BBC's royal coverage sometimes suggest that balance is not necessary because the monarchy enjoys public support. It's worth looking at that claim in detail. According to the most recent poll on the issue - by ComRes for the *Daily Telegraph*<sup>3</sup> - 66% believe Britain is better off with a monarchy. When phrased slightly differently, 53% say Britain would be worse off without it.

On other issues that the BBC readily classifies as controversial, public opinion is far less divided: 79% of people oppose ending immigration controls on Bulgaria and Romania<sup>4</sup>, 80% support a referendum on the EU<sup>5</sup> and just 22% support the human rights act<sup>6</sup>. Yet these topics are still treated in a balanced way, with roughly equal representation of both sides. It is also worth contrasting the widespread media coverage received by Ukip - whose latest polling figure is just 9%<sup>7</sup> - with that of republicanism, which has at least twice as much support.

While this complaint is specific to the BBC News Channel, we have said previously that there is a general problem of institutionalised bias in favour of the monarchy right across the BBC's output. Many BBC staff, researchers, producers, editors and journalists privately agree with us on this point. We have previously met with your predecessor and were simply told that the BBC saw no problem with their coverage and that any serious discussions on the issue would be contained within a very limited number of programmes and channels, more or less excluding BBC 1 or flagship programmes. This is clearly unacceptable and flies in the face of mounting evidence of pro-monarchy bias, and since that meeting two years ago the problem has only gotten worse.

As a representative of Britain's republican movement, I am requesting a meeting with you to discuss these concerns and consider how the BBC's institutional pro-monarchy bias can be addressed.

Yours sincerely

Graham Smith  
Chief Executive Officer  
Republic

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3 [http://www.comres.co.uk/polls/Sunday\\_Telegraph\\_Royal\\_Family\\_Poll.pdf](http://www.comres.co.uk/polls/Sunday_Telegraph_Royal_Family_Poll.pdf)

4 <http://www.comres.co.uk/poll/838/get-britain-out-immigration-poll.htm>

5 <http://www.populus.co.uk/Poll/European-Union-Referendum-Poll/>

6 [http://cdn.yougov.com/today\\_uk\\_import/yg-archives-pol-yougovitv-humanrights-240311.pdf](http://cdn.yougov.com/today_uk_import/yg-archives-pol-yougovitv-humanrights-240311.pdf)

7 <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/archives/7926>