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Rona Fairhead
Chair of BBC Trust

CMS 267453/asg
15th June 2015

Dear Rona,

EU Referendum Bill - amendment

As you will know, an amendment has been tabled to the EU Referendum Bill, setting out proposals for the establishment of a new adjudicatory body in respect of broadcast coverage of the EU referendum. Whilst the Government will resist this, there are issues covered by the content of the amendment, which I would like to raise with you directly.

There can be no doubt that the EU referendum will be a pivotal moment in this country's history – as such, I am sure that you will agree that the coverage of this referendum by our broadcasters must be beyond reproach. Whilst the UK's broadcasters, and indeed our regulatory system, have a well-deserved reputation for high quality, impartial coverage, evidence such as Lord Wilson's BBC Governors Review of 2005 shows that the track-record in coverage of EU matters is not flawless. Where lapses occur, it is of course vital to the public that adequate and proportionate corrections are made in prompt order.

I am of course aware that during Elections there are regulatory processes in place to assess due impartiality complaints that might require redress before polling day. For example, I understand that Ofcom can expedite investigations to be resolved within 7 to 10 days. As you may be aware, the proposed amendment suggests that complaints should be adjudicated within 24 hours, and I am sure we agree that it is in the public interest that responses are given within as short a time frame as possible.

In light of the huge importance the public will place on the EU referendum, and the coverage of it by broadcasters, however, I would encourage Ofcom and the BBC Trust as the responsible regulators to consider whether your respective processes for redress for complaints which are upheld are as efficient and timely as possible. The potential for unwarranted distortions to informed debate bears high risks, and the longer that erroneous views or partial coverage are allowed to stand unchallenged or uncorrected, the greater the chance of public and democratic detriment.



Furthermore, it is self-evident that the high esteem in which the BBC and the UK's commercial public service broadcasters are held, both in the UK and abroad, hinges on their reputation for high quality, balanced and impartial coverage of important events. It is my view that reconsidering the speed with which any redress is made, and amending processes if required, can only strengthen this reputation.

I look forward to hearing from you in due course as to how the existing regulatory structure will be able to deliver the impartial and balanced coverage of the EU referendum which will be so crucial for the public.

I have copied this letter to the Director General of the BBC, and I have written in similar terms to Ofcom regarding coverage from the other major broadcasters.

Yours ever

John

Rt Hon John Whittingdale OBE MP
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport