

Britain: BBC kow-tows to right-wing calls for censorship

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The BBC has issued an unprecedented apology for transmitting a live debate in which American policy in the aftermath of last Tuesday's attacks was criticised. As Western governments prepare for war, the public apology issued by Director-General Greg Dyke for the decision to transmit live the *Question Time* programme following the bombing of the World Trade Centre underscores the threat to civil liberties.

Dyke's apology was extracted after a hysterical campaign, led by Britain's right-wing press, which accused the BBC of "anti-American racism" for allowing public criticism of US foreign policy to be aired on national television. The weekly *Question Time* programme is a high-profile forum in which audience participants can quiz a panel of politicians, pundits and media commentators on the major issues of the day. The September 13 broadcast was given over to a discussion of the New York and Washington bombings, and US President George W Bush's declaration that America was at war.

Coming two days after the terrorist attacks, the programme provided the first opportunity for a public debate concerning the events and drew enormous interest. Five and a half million people tuned in, double the broadcast's normal viewing figures.

In keeping with its usual format, the four-person panel was intended to represent a cross-section of political opinion. Former US Ambassador Philip Lader and the former Liberal Democrat leader and ex-Special Boat Service officer Lord Paddy Ashdown sat alongside Labour MP Tam Dalyell, a longstanding critic of British and US foreign policy and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a Muslim columnist on the *Independent* newspaper. The BBC had also taken the decision to substitute Dalyell for Labour MP George Galloway, whose invitation to appear on the programme was rescinded at the last moment. Galloway is known for his vocal denunciations of US and

British policy in the Middle East and has been criticised for visits he has made to Iraq.

As usual the 180-strong audience had been handpicked from applicants to the BBC website, who are asked to answer a number of questions about themselves and their voting habits to enable a "balanced selection". Despite some press claims that "anti-US Muslims" dominated the audience, the BBC insisted that "the vast majority of the audience were white Anglo-Saxons," but that it had included "a few members of the British Muslim community and US citizens living over here." Although some had expressed disagreements with US foreign policy, the majority "supported mainstream Western opinion", a BBC spokesman said. On arrival at the London studio, individuals could submit questions for the panel. These are first vetted and a selection passed on to the programme's moderator David Dimbleby.

However, unlike other *Question Time* broadcasts, which are usually pre-recorded and then edited, last Thursday's show went out live. Audience participants have said that they were told the aim was to create a "town hall" atmosphere, of free and lively debate. As a result, the programme caused a furore because it breached the otherwise saturation media coverage portraying Britain as a nation united in supporting President Bush and Prime Minister Blair's declaration of war.

Whilst the debate was at times tense, the contributions by the studio audience were generally serious and thoughtful. All participants expressed their deep sympathy for those killed in the bombings and their relatives, but several made clear that such natural human empathy should not prevent searching questions being posed. These included:

* In the midst of this carnage, won't a harder response provoke more action that will affect innocent lives?

* Should Britain support America in whatever course of military action it takes?

* If the Taliban do not hand over Osama Bin Laden for trial should the allies then attack Afghanistan?

* Does the bombing in America represent a failure in US foreign policy?

This last question proved the most contentious. Citing earlier attacks by the US on Libya, Iraq, Sudan and Afghanistan, as well as its continued support for Israel's ongoing terror against the Palestinians, some audience members questioned if this had not created a situation in which the US was "despised by millions" around the world.

Whilst several members of the panel conceded that it may be necessary for the US to review its foreign policy, former US Ambassador Lader avoided the question altogether. In a deliberately emotional response, he said he was saddened that it was possible just 48 hours after the bombings for people to "abstract" themselves from the human suffering that had been caused.

According to the BBC, 400 complaints were received about the broadcast. Panellist Alibhai-Brown later gave an indication of which political sensitivities had been offended by the debate. After noting that she had received a huge number of supportive e-mails following the programme, she cited antagonistic letters and e-mails, some of which "invite me to die, and the more enthusiastic offer to help me to do this. Someone writing under the name Sid Bendell asks me to go and 'rot in the pissholes' from whence I came." Another, from Tom B, states, "You have no right to represent my country to the American Ambassador you f---ing bitch. You are a wog, so why is the BBC letting you do this?"

The numbers of complaints may also have been inflated by the hysterical, grossly distorted and inflammatory press coverage of the programme. *Sun* columnist Richard Littlejohn described it as "the most disgusting, despicable, distorted programme ever broadcast on public television". Claiming the audience was overrun by left-wingers and "militant Muslim fanatics", he said it was the equivalent of running a discussion programme during the Second World War involving a panel of Nazi sympathisers and "an audience handpicked from the Waffen SS by Josef Goebbels".

The BBC has long been a favoured target of the right-wing, because it produces much of the most watched and respected news and documentary coverage. For these layers, any attempt at objectivity and rational debate is seen as an infringement on their right to monopolise and poison political discourse. *Telegraph* columnist Daniel Johnson was most explicit in voicing this standpoint. He

acknowledged that the programme had been designed to air a mix of opinions, but denounced "balance" in this instance as "inappropriate, given that Britain is almost united in its support for the US."

At first a BBC spokesman had defended the programme, noting that nobody in the studio had "condoned the atrocity," saying that it was appropriate to debate "the important and difficult issues that now confront the US government—and many other policymakers around the world". Defending the broadcast Alibhai-Brown said that "Out of 24 audible audience interjections, five were strongly for America; seven were overtly hostile to American policies and behaviour, and the rest were unbiased and open." Dalyell said that the BBC had nothing to apologise for. "I know what the feeling may have been, but I think it was representative", he said. "It was an audience who were a cross-section of people in London."

Yet by Saturday morning, whilst still maintaining that "much of *Question Time* was an entirely proper debate", Dyke had issued his public apology and said that he accepted that it was "inappropriate" for the programme to have been shown live. It should have been recorded and edited before being screened, he said, and possibly even been held at a later date.

The decision by the BBC to roll over in the face of such criticism is an example of grotesque cowardice, with ominous implications. In equating any public questioning of US foreign policy with crude anti-American prejudice, the BBC has paved the way for further calls to censor opposition to war being reported. This can only aid the government and the press to steamroller public opinion behind Bush's war-drive, despite the grave reservations that *Question Time* revealed amongst many working people.



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