

## Is the BBC's reporting on economics impartial?

Published: January 12, 2026, 10:20 pm

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The BBC [commissioned a report](#) from Michael Blastland and Andrew Dilnot that was submitted to the BBC in November and has now been published. It had this title:

### **Review of the impartiality of BBC coverage of taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt.**

Although I am not a big fan of Andrew Dilnot's objectivity, Michael Blastland seems to have a good record on this issue, and the report is well worth reading. I think it is a genuine attempt to address the faults in the reporting of the issues noted in its title.

I will attach at the end of this post the summary pages from the report because they are worth looking at. What I wish to highlight instead are some of the issues raised in it which might get overlooked.

The overall finding was that there was weakness in reporting, but the resulting biases were to left and right, although I have to say that I do not think that the report supports that claim: most of the weaknesses noted appear to me to suggest under-reporting of the concerns of those who might be on the left.

The reasons for this, if the report is read carefully are:

- \* Economics reporters are not economically confident;
- \* Those reporters are too willing to have what they report dictated by political parties and, most especially, other media;
- \* Those biases are not questioned often enough, and nor are the assumptions that suggest that the issues reported are the real matters of concern;
- \* There are too few voices on the BBC, especially those inclined to offer alternative

opinion, which by implication means that the neoliberal hegemony is reinforced;

\* Inappropriate emphasis might be given to those numbers that appeal to those who seek to set the news agenda rather than those who are impacted by it.

I stress, these are my interpretation, but I think I too have tried to be fair. A couple of examples illustrate my points. This one is on household analogies:

**Note on household analogies.**

That states don't tend to retire or die, or pay off their debts entirely, is one way national debt is not like household or personal debt, not like a credit card for example, and why analogies with household debt, or suggestions the government must 'pay off' or 'pay down' the debt can cause intense debate. Clearly, pithy, accessible metaphors are valuable to journalists and audiences. And 'paying off' is a tempting phrase even to those who know the arguments because it seems to express the idea there must be some degree of discipline over debt, even for a state. We just used a household analogy by saying mortgage debt equal to 100% of income would not usually induce fear. But again, it helps to know that household analogies are dangerous territory, intensely contested, and can easily mislead.

The points are well made, but how the alternative should be presented is not discussed.

Another example comes from the failure to report on bus travel

Another example which loses out for a different reason is coverage of public spending on buses. Bus travel is, for a great many people, all there really is. There are more journeys by bus than any other form of public transport, and these services are significantly shaped by public spending through concessionary fares, subsidies, etc. But trains and planes receive more attention. Why might that be, do you think?

Not least, trains can mean big, shiny new railways. Buses can admittedly be tricky to report, as they might be many different stories, not one. They're also thought boring. They're sometimes covered by local BBC services, but rare on national news. Transport specialists know all this. They'd like to do more but struggle to be heard. But from an impartiality perspective 'not worth it because it's hard to cover and boring,' doesn't cut it. Boring to you, maybe, if you don't take the bus. Make them interesting – they're of interest to passengers. 'Boring' is another of those judgments that doesn't feel like it matters to impartiality but can mean neglect for big interests.

As a metaphor for the voices of many people not being heard because the journalists live in a different world, this was powerful.

So was this on the over-emphasis on income tax:

**3. Whose interests are missing?**

Thinking about a broad definition of impartiality, one question we asked was 'are people's diverse interests proportionately represented in BBC coverage?' There's no perfect measure of that, but we think we can observe misalignments. What gets talked about can obscure big interests that don't, bringing risks to impartiality by omission. A striking example is VAT.

In Wales, more VAT is paid than income tax, ditto North East England. In fact, a large proportion of the whole UK population pays more VAT than income tax. For a great many households across the country, VAT is the biggest tax and so to them you might say the most important. More than one third of UK adults pay no income tax at all, but they do pay VAT. The table shows the dramatically different tax interests of selected parts of the UK.

Nation / Region	Income Tax	VAT
North East England	£1.5b	£7.1b

These two sections by themselves speak of profound class and regional biases that suggest significant partiality. As they note, balance between the front benches is not enough:

To us, this is central. If the coverage underweights a big interest of those on low incomes or bus users and so on, or under-represents a common expert view about debt, or fails to see what's happening to people in the longer term because of a focus on the political theme of the day, or (see below) implies some people should have more resources than others – then regardless of what the front benches in politics are saying, is the coverage impartial? We think not.

The report did correctly note that there is a need for the BBC to emphasise that many so-called facts in economics are just choices:

All told, accepting the language of necessity about taxation, public spending, government borrowing or debt is a risk to impartiality. In any case, there's a simple, richer, alternative to 'must' that emphasises choice and debate. We noted some excellent examples of this recently.

Too often they imply that the BBC suggests such choice does not exist, when actually it does. This comment on fiscal rules is illuminating on this:

The phrase 'fiscal rule' might likewise convey necessity. But fiscal rules are only rules because the government of the day chooses to call them that. They may be reasonable attempts at self-discipline or signals of intent, but they're not rules because some natural law dictates it. A fiscal rule saying debt should normally reduce as a share of GDP over time might be reasonable, but there can also be reasonable debate about whether now is normal, and some argue against it altogether.

Fiscal rules are just made up. They aren't rules at all.

But perhaps the most telling comment that was not given sufficient emphasis was this, on the fact that most journalists are not retained in economics, even when they have been commenting on it for years:

The only defence for non-specialists is to know their limits and ask for help when they need it. But even senior journalists have shown they don't always know when they need it. If journalists don't know the arguments, they're likely to revert to what one called their 'resting state' – not a deliberate bias, but a set of presumptions. Never underestimate the BBC's resting state, she said.

One journalist said to us: '*We're a sort of team of arts graduates, basically.*' It was said with a smile of just one team – and doesn't do justice to the effort they make to keep up to speed – but contains enough truth to leave them feeling vulnerable.

There is, in other words, a bias to the 'norm', which is the mainstream view because the experience to question it is lacking.

I think the report is more critical in reality than it superficially appears to be. And the bias is to the right, whether the authors appreciate it or not (and they may not be seeing the bias in their own work). The BBC has a lot to do to get this right. But they are not alone.

## Appendix - the report's main findings, in summary

*The aim of broad impartiality is right but means tough decisions about BBC coverage of fiscal policy.*

### Overall summary.

We found widespread appreciation for BBC coverage of tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt, and plenty to applaud. But against a test of broad impartiality, we also had concerns – about gaps and assumptions that put impartiality at risk.

These weaknesses can lead to output that appears to favour particular political positions, but curiously these lean left *and* right. That makes a charge of systematic political bias in this area hard to sustain. So while the risks to impartiality may look political, we think they need a better explanation, which is that they're really journalistic. This is no less serious and raises questions for the BBC and its journalists about what kind of journalism they want to do and how to do it. Inevitably, we focus on what could change. Much could apply at least equally to other UK media.

### Summary of main findings.

We think the emphasis on broad impartiality in the BBC's response to the Serota Review timely and necessary. We found that significant interests and perspectives on tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt could be better served by BBC output and were not protected by a simpler model of political impartiality. We would not call this bias. But we don't see how BBC coverage can be described as always fair to different interests if it's unbalanced in this broad sense. This is an exacting and exciting ideal that drives much that follows.

**'We want all editorial leaders in the BBC to recognise the challenge of serving an ever more diverse audience and to be part of our effort to bring a broader set of viewpoints and perspectives to the British public from across the whole UK.'**

**'This presents an opportunity to address the issue of impartiality in its broadest sense, pushing the debate beyond traditional left/right divides and addressing the challenge of audiences who do not currently feel their lives, attitudes and opinions are adequately represented or portrayed on the BBC. We will explore how new approaches and our mix of subjects, voices and tones could help to address this challenge.'**

*BBC Action Plan incorporating response to the Serota Review, Oct 2021.*

We did not find evidence of wilful bias, but breaches of broad impartiality can arise nevertheless. For example...

- We think too many journalists lack understanding of basic economics or lack confidence reporting it. This brings a high risk to impartiality. In the period of this review, it particularly affected debt. Some journalists seem to feel instinctively that debt is simply bad, full stop, and don't appear to realise this can be contested and contestable.
- Several general assumptions seem to lurk like this either unnoticed or uncorrected. Others that outsiders observed in BBC coverage were: 'more public spending is good' and 'tax cuts are good.' Whilst these views might seem to make intuitive sense, all favour some interests above others.
- Above all they hide the trade-offs. You can't be impartial between competing demands for resources if you don't ask whether more over here means less over there. These trade-offs can seldom be known or specified completely, but they could be more explicitly acknowledged.
- One on-air statement from a BBC journalist said the UK government 'will have to...' We appreciate this was made live and might have been unintended. Still, BBC journalists should exercise extreme caution before suggesting a government 'will have to...' raise taxes, cut taxes, cut spending, raise spending, cut debt, raise debt, etc. – in any area. These are choices. They may be choices with reasonable arguments in their favour, so might the alternatives. It should be no surprise if people react badly when the BBC appears to take sides. **Page 34** A choice is a 'must'. Again, it's a lack of sensitivity to what's contestable and why.
- That example highlights a general problem. Too often, it's not clear from a report that fiscal policy decisions are also political choices: they're not