



Director, News and Current Affairs

Ross Greer MSP for the West of Scotland
Scottish Green Party
MG.21 Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

12 December 2018

Dear Mr Greer,

Thank you for your letter of 26 November to Steve Morrison, who has asked me to reply as the issue you raise is the responsibility of BBC News.

Before addressing your concerns about our reporting of think tanks, I should say that I do not agree that we would invite anyone on to our news programmes to “provide a platform” to advance a specific agenda. Each day we interview many contributors on our programmes. We would, where necessary, challenge their views as an entirely proper part of the journalistic process, and within coverage that will always aim to demonstrate due impartiality.

You have asked the BBC to outline what working procedure or guidance it has in place in respect of think tanks.

We would generally aim to state the general viewpoint of a think tank before or during an interview with one of their number in order to help audiences understand the context in which they are speaking and to calibrate their comments accordingly. In doing so, we would aim to keep within our Editorial Guidelines, against which our output is judged, and which state:

“We should normally identify on-air and online sources of information and significant contributors, and provide their credentials, so that our audiences can judge their status.”

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/>

As you imply, however, there is an increased focus today on where many organisations, including the IEA and the Taxpayers' Alliance, have obtained their funding and how transparent they might be about it. Our policy is that we would aim to mention the funding of any organisation, or its lack of transparency, when it is relevant to the story. We would also seek to challenge contributors and the funding of their organisations if there is an apparent conflict of interest with the subject they are discussing.

I hope you understand, however, that it would not be practical for us to list each funder of a think tank on every occasion, nor would we aim to do so if we did not judge it to be relevant to the report. For example, you raise the specific issue of a report on Newsnight. I understand you to be referring to an item that in fact appeared on “Viewsnight” which is Newsnight's digital-first place for ideas and opinion. As it was on ‘Viewsnight’, it was clearly signalled to viewers that the item was the contributor's personal, and indeed partisan, view on the privatisation of the NHS. Whether the IEA's funding has in fact directly influenced the organisation's view as you suggest was not as relevant as it might be in, for example, an impartial examination of the issue that the BBC had itself carried out.

Thank you for raising these concerns, and giving me a chance to address them. Your letter is a reminder of the importance of providing pertinent information to our audiences and I would like to assure you that we will always aim to do this.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "F. M. Unsworth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

Fran Unsworth

Director, News & Current Affairs