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Joanna Carr
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BBC Politics Show

Sent by email to joanna.carr@bbc.co.uk

Dear Joanna

Re: Politics Show on Bypasses – 1 Oct 2006

Gareth Butler suggested I contact you about my concerns about the standard of the item on Sunday 1 October about bypasses. Gareth seemed to think there was nothing wrong with the item and that it was simply a story about whether or not the government have kept their bypass promises. I strongly disagree, and would like to discuss the quality and standard of the piece. May I make it clear that I am not complaining that the piece was not about anti-road protests (as Gareth seemed to suggest). My complaint is that it was not balanced, and was not accurate. It was advertised on both the Politics Show website, the opening to the programme by Jon Sopel, and in the introduction to the item as some sort of debate about whether bypasses are not being built fast enough, or whether they are the answer at all. It turned out to be simply a one sided commentary about how the government are not building enough bypasses.

I was very disappointed at the imbalance in the programme and the inaccuracies. There were no interviews from anyone who could put the arguments about whether road building actually works or not, and the numerous alternatives that could be tried first. This was despite recording an interview with Stephen Joseph of Transport 2000, but failing to include it.

David Thompson and the regional presenters were not balanced in their reporting, seeming to be keen to promote the view that there weren't enough roads being built. The reporters seemed to be promoting a view rather than exploring both sides of a complex and controversial issue. There were also some serious errors.

The report echoed a piece in the Times recently which unquestioningly quoted a report by the Road Users Alliance, which is a road lobby group on behalf of the oil and roadbuilding industries. Both the Times and the RUA reports included many inaccuracies. I am very disappointed to see the BBC following suit. It almost sounded as if the BBC had become a mouthpiece for the roads lobby.

I have listened back through the item in detail and here are my comments.

The item was advertised on the Politics Show website, and opened by Jon Sopel as: "*In their 10 year transport plan the government said that they would build over 70 bypasses by the year 2010. In fact they have come no where near to that. So should they get a move on, or are bypasses an old fashioned solution to a much wider problem?*" (24.25). This indicated

that there was going to be some sort of debate about the merits of otherwise of bypasses, and that there would be some balance in the piece.

In the opening comments of the show, Jon previewed the piece by saying: *"Bypass standoffs are happening all around the country. Should the government be building more of them, or are they the wrong solution for transport problems?"* (1.50). Again this indicated some sort of debate, and that there would be discussion on both sides.

The item then showed lots of dramatic footage of direct action protest, with the David Thompson's voice over talking about *"argy bargy, wanton destruction, tree huggers, all over a bit of road"* (24.55) - not exactly an in depth examination of the arguments.

David Thompson then went onto admit *"They might not be fighting pitch battles over them any more, but believe me bypasses are still a hot political issue"* (25.07) - again indicating we might actually hear an examination of the arguments.

We then had two interviews with Jackie King, the mother from Marcham, who talked about road safety issues and the need for the road, interrupted by presenter David Thompson describing how *"desperate"* people are, and the long campaign.

In contrast to that we had an interview with Will Cumbar, a local organic farmer, who could only talk about how the road affected him, making it very easy for anyone viewing to dismiss concerns about the road as simplistic, narrow, selfish and NIMBY. He had an interview of similar length to Mrs King, which is not the issue. What is at issue is that whereas Ms King was allowed to talk about highly emotive safety issues, and how the road was needed, there was no one to answer these assertions. Mr Cumbar's interview was restricted to issues that simply affected him. His interview was wasted talking about the symmetry of his fields, rather than whether the bypass was the best solution or not.

Gareth Butler, in his telephone conversation with me, and in his email response to Stephen Joseph of Transport 2000, quoted from Mr Cumbar, to claim that Mr Cumbar had spoken of wider issues than how the road simply affected his land. He sent Stephen this extract: *"There's bound to be an impact on the environment from building a new road anywhere. In this case we've got 600 acres of open countryside that people enjoy walking through, 300 acres of it is farmed organically and we know that's good for wildlife and so, yes, there would be noise and pollution and general destruction, I suppose, of the current environment."*

I have listened back, and in fact in the item broadcast Mr Cumbar actually said: *"We've got 600 acres of open countryside that people enjoy walking through, 300 acres of it is farmed organically and we know that's good for wildlife and so, yes, there would be noise and pollution and general destruction, I suppose, of the current environment."* (27.11)

His interview was not an examination of the need for the road (as Mrs King's interview was) and was exclusively about the impact on his farm only. This interview did not meet the expectations given by Jon Sopel and David Thompson in their introductions that there would be an examination of whether bypasses are the right solution. This short interview simply examined the impact on Mr Cumbar. It is simply not acceptable to say the farmer at Marcham gave any anti-road argument at all, as he simply talked about the impact on his farm. There are many arguments against roadbuilding, and he did not represent any of them, certainly not whether the road at Marcham was the best solution.

The case study in Marcham was crying out for somebody to talk about pedestrian crossings and pedestrian priority measures (easy to implement and very low cost), and lorry bans (which are being trialled in numerous towns and regions of the country). A lorry ban is a screamingly obvious solution to a large part of the problems experienced at Marcham. It would simply mean the County Council directing heavy vehicles onto the strategic network where they belong, rather than rat-running through villages. This is, after all, government policy. It could be implemented tomorrow, and would cost virtually nothing.

David introduced the next phase of the item "*Bypasses are something that arouse huge passions for a variety of different reasons, and on both sides of the argument as my colleagues around the country have been finding out*". Again there was the illusion that the viewer might be treated to some discussion of the issues, and why people might actually oppose road schemes.

However, in all three regional interviews there was virtually no exploration of the reasons why the schemes might be opposed. Two did not mention any opposition or arguments against at all. The presenters simply used their pieces to talk about how desperately needed the roads were, as if there were no opposing arguments at all. They were not acting as journalists, but seemed to be campaigners themselves.

The regional presenter at Kingskerswell in Devon talked of it as a 'clogged artery'. He mentioned that there was opposition as there had been emails sent in, but simplified it to just a protest about the impact on the adjacent countryside (again making the campaigners look like NIMBYs who don't have any arguments against the road). . To simplify it down to "destruction of countryside" is not an examination of the debate, and paints local campaigners as narrow and unconcerned about their village, or "treehuggers" as David Thompson sneered in the opening sequence. The SW presenter used his slot to simply talk about all the delays and how the road was needed.

In fact there is a very large community campaign against the road by the Kingskerswell Alliance, who have had 2 Parish Councillors elected on an anti-bypass ticket, and they are proposing online improvements to the existing infrastructure, and have good ideas about how to reduce congestion through better bus services, and traffic management. The reporter got it wrong that the road has been downgraded to the 'maybe' list. In fact it was included in the Regional Funding Allocations announced by the Secretary of State on 6 July: http://www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft_localtrans/documents/page/dft_localtrans_611976.hcsp

The presenter in Long Stratton in Norfolk incorrectly described the road as a "*key strategic route*" - this sounds like she has been listening to the misinformation of the notoriously pro-road Norfolk County Council too much. The scheme was not considered a regional priority by the East of England region, so how can it be considered a 'key strategic route'? The presenter then incorrectly said that it was the government who had 'pulled back' from funding. In fact it was the East of England region itself who advised the government that the scheme was not a regional funding priority. There is also opposition to the scheme, particularly from villagers in surrounding villages who will have the new dual carriageway dumped near their village. The presenter was so passionate about the delay, she seemed to be acting almost as a campaigner for the scheme.

Jon Sopel confidently opened the programme with the assertion that "*in their 10 year transport plan the government said that they would build over 70 bypasses by the year 2010. In fact they have come no where near to that*". To those of us horrified at Labour's complete abandonment of its commitments to halt traffic growth, move away from road building and to invest in alternatives, this assertion is laughable. In fact since the 1998-2000 so-called Multi Modal Studies and Roads Reviews, the government have built 75 road schemes since 2000 (list attached). They have resurrected the old 1990's roads programme, and have now approved over 200 road schemes, at a current total of over £12 billion.

Many of the road schemes in the list are 'bypasses', but be aware that road schemes have all types of names - bypass, link road, improvement, dualling, regeneration route, distributor road, ring road. Sometimes they are even called "Integrated Transport Packages" to disguise the fact that they are a road! The name 'bypass' is given to make a road scheme seem less threatening.

The fact is that there is a lot of road building happening, in an era when we are acknowledging that climate change is the most serious issue we face. Road transport currently accounts for over 21 per cent of UK CO2 emissions and rises every year. It is vital that we do all we can to minimise the climate impact of road transport not encourage and

facilitate more traffic growth through road building. Roadbuilding (in the context of what we now know about climate change) is indeed "*old fashioned*" (to use Jon Sopel's phrase). The issues could not be more serious and needed exploration within the programme.

If you had wanted a genuine debate about whether or not bypasses are an "*old fashioned solution to a much wider problem*", you could have done no better than to look at the recent and in depth research by Lilli Matson, Ian Taylor, Lynn Sloman and John Elliott, for Countryside Agency and CPRE (*Beyond Transport Infrastructure*, July 2006 - <http://www.cpre.org.uk/news-releases/news-rel-2006/29-06.htm>). This examined the impact and the success / failure of three 1990's bypasses - Polegate, Newbury, and Blackburn Southern Bypass. All roads had filled up much faster than predicted, filling up to the predicted 2010 levels within a few years of opening. Newbury is now more gridlocked than ever, and people in Blackburn have failed to learn the lessons and are calling for another bypass as the newly opened one had already failed. Local businesses in Polegate have resorted to signposting on the new road as their businesses are dying as people are going further afield.

I understand that campaigners in Mottram and Tintwistle in the Peak District National Park contacted you offering to take part in the show, but did not even receive a reply. This is a great shame as rather than calling for a bypass, they are more impressively calling for a lorry ban - to divert the HGVs onto the motorway network where they should be anyway, and not rat running through their villages. With the publication of the details of the bypass scheme, local residents, surrounding local authorities and the Park Authority itself have seen the government's own figures that the road will result in a massive increase in traffic in the surrounding areas. A lorry ban makes much more sense rather than attracting more traffic into the area, and destroying the natural environment.

I have also since learnt that campaigners at Kingskerswell and Weymouth contacted the Politics Show a week before the show, and did not even receive a response. Perhaps others did too?

The only conclusion I can draw is that you had the opportunity to make a balanced programme but chose not to. I remain very unhappy about the programme.

I think this really was a dreadful piece of reporting. It was poorly researched and sometimes incorrect. It was also inexcusably unbalanced. Why introduce the story as one about whether roads work or not, and then fail to present one side of the argument? Why allow your presenters to give impassioned pleas for roads rather than presenting facts? Why interview Stephen Joseph, yet not use his interview or indeed anyone to present the other side of the argument?

This was a missed opportunity to genuinely explore the issues, and I look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Lush,
Coordinator, Road Block