

The millions in EU funding the BBC tried to hide

Following on from our article about the “nobbling” of the BBC in the 1970s, our attention has been drawn to this article in the *Spectator*, which appeared last year. Although now firmly in the pro-EU camp, the BBC is not keen to let us know just how much money it receives from Brussels.

Miles Goslett writes:-

Over the last three years the BBC has secretly obtained millions of pounds in grants from the European Union. Licence fee payers might assume that the Corporation would have been compelled to disclose the source of this money in its annual reports, but they bear no trace of it specifically. In the latest set of accounts, for example, these funds are simply referred to as ‘other grant income’.

Instead of making an open declaration, the BBC’s successful lobbying for this money had to be prised out of it using a Freedom of Information (FoI) request lodged for *The Spectator*, proving that there was never any danger of the state broadcaster’s bosses volunteering it willingly.

The FoI response confirms that BBC staff applied for, and accepted, about £3 million of EU funds between April 2011 and November 2013, most of which has been spent on unspecified ‘research and development’ projects, with the remaining £1 million spent on programming.

Next to the £3.65 billion tax-free income that the BBC receives each year via the licence fee, £3 million is, admittedly, a mere speck of dust – just 0.8 per cent of its annual guaranteed revenue and, obviously, even less than that when spread over 36 months.

However, the size of these EU gifts is arguably irrelevant, even though they are indicative of the BBC's seemingly unquenchable thirst for public money. What is undeniably true is that the BBC has acted with characteristic slyness by concealing that it ever requested, let alone received, this European cash, suggesting that it is uneasy about the public being aware of its financial arrangements.

With the European elections only three months away, *{this article was written in February 2014}* the timing of this disclosure is certainly unhelpful to the BBC, fuelling longstanding pro-EU bias concerns.

Rob Wilson MP, an aide to the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, says that he believes evidence of the BBC receiving any EU money leaves it open to attack because being on its payroll risks feeding the perception that is incapable of reporting objectively on European affairs. Mr Wilson also questions why the BBC needed to go 'cap in hand' to the EU for funds in the first place when its enviably secure financial position allows it to outgun commercial rivals in so many spheres.

He says: 'The whole point of the licence fee is to protect the BBC's political independence and impartiality by providing it with a source of funding that is outside the hands of governments and politicians. Thanks to this FoI response, we now learn that it has been going cap in hand to the EU for millions of pounds on the quiet over the last few years. Such outrageous flouting of the principles on which the BBC is based and funded will only promote cynicism about its political impartiality and lead to a loss of trust in the BBC's independence.'

In the FoI response, the BBC refuses to name any of the 'research and development' projects or television programmes on which it spent the EU grant money. This, apparently, is information that's far too sensitive for mere licence payers

to be told about.

All it says by way of explanation is that the funds come from two separate sources – the EU Framework Programme for Research and Development; and the European Regional Development Fund. It admits that during the financial year 2010/11 it accepted £956,000 from the first of these funds and that during the following financial year it was given a further £435,000 for the same purpose.

During the first half of the current financial year, between April and November 2013, it was awarded a third EU research and development grant worth £812,000.

More money – none of which is given without a formal application – is expected before April 2014 but the running total for these three tranches stands at £2.2 million.

A BBC spokesman says the money was used for 'technology-based projects based on existing BBC R&D priorities and business needs' but would elaborate no further. The BBC's response then reveals that it has also received EU grants for programme-making from the European Regional Development Fund.

Although it claims such funding is commonplace among Europe's public service broadcasters, it has declined to provide a breakdown of the grants beyond insisting that none of the money was spent on news programmes. A helpful BBC insider has worked out that the total amount of EU money spent on programmes over the last three years is likely to have been £1 million.

However, with a straight face, the BBC does explain in its response that Channel 4 has in the past received funding from the same source, and that it used its EU prize money to make the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire*.

When the BBC is prepared to use an FoI response to state how a rival organisation spent its EU booty, but refuses to explain how it spent its own, its standards of transparency are surely broken.

Eurosceptic Labour MP Kate Hoey, now part of an unofficial coalition of politicians overseeing the privately-funded organisation *Newswatch*, which monitors the BBC for EU bias at a cost of £60,000 per year, says the FoI disclosure is 'shocking'. She says:

'I have grave concerns about the bias of the BBC when it comes to EU matters. I find the whole thing shocking. The lack of transparency is unjustified. Why does it seem so worried about people knowing where it gets its money? What has the BBC got to hide other than knowing that many of us don't trust them on EU matters and the need for a referendum on Britain's EU membership?'

Ms Hoey adds that she has concerns that the BBC 'very rarely' reports Labour MPs' views on Europe. She says:

'Even Today in Parliament [on Radio 4] always tries to convey Tory splits on Europe, and this doesn't help the perception of an EU bias. There are Labour MPs with strong views on Europe as well. It doesn't help that the BBC very rarely reports these views.'

The evidence contained in this FoI response is the latest in a series of examples shining some light on the BBC's relationship with the EU.