

[They're not biased at the Beeb - they just know better than us

Once, when I worked for the BBC, I was called in to see a very senior person within the corporation on the issue of political bias in news reporting. It was a slightly surreal experience and even as I made my way to the lifts I had that slight but uncomfortable dampness you get around the gusset of your trousers when you have to see someone much more important than you. And I began muttering to myself in a very middle-class accent while trying to look serious.

That's how I react when confronted with authority: I talk like a member of the Eton 2nd XI and crouch because of the sweat. It doesn't work as a strategy. I tried it on some important Russians a while back and they thought I was mad.

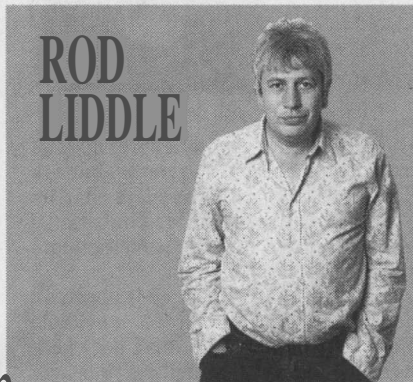
Anyway, this BBC panjandrum, in his huge panelled office, wished to impart to me the important point that my programme - the Today programme - should be absolutely impartial in the coming US presidential elections and that no political bias would be tolerated.

There had been a few mutterings in the press that the corporation was ever so slightly - well, you know, how can I put it? - worried about George W. Bush. Just tended a little towards the Democrat cause. And the panjandrum wanted to make sure that we would be absolutely even-handed.

As he talked at me, I felt my eyes wandering to the political posters he had pinned up behind his desk, the ones he had collected while working in a previous job, for a political organisation. Big blue posters. "Vote Democrat," they said.

A few months before this I'd been called by another equally important BBC panjandrum, about the vexed issue of Britain's role in Europe. Again, there had been complaints - from the then Tory peer Lord Pearson of Rannoch among others - that the BBC seemed to be hostile to the Eurosceptic cause; that we were viewing those who opposed greater integration and joining a single currency with contempt.

I sort of agreed with these complaints, despite being on the left politically. I



Just who is Guido Fawkes, aka Paul Staines - the semi-literate, extreme-right-wing, public-school-educated, foreign-born former bankrupt and convicted criminal blogger whose ineptly written innuendoes may yet put an end to the career of one of Britain's better politicians, William Hague?

Well, Mr Staines is Blogsville incarnate - the very essence of that vast network of talentless and embittered individuals tapping away at their keyboards in the intellectual vacuum of cyberspace, only occasionally leaving their computer screens to heat up a Tesco microwave-ready mini filled garlic and coriander nan bread with Indian dip selection (mango chutney, pickle, cucumber raita ©) before returning to spew out some more unsubstantiated bile.

This is anti-journalism, and nobody takes any notice of it - except, of course, the mainstream media and the government.

thought we had marginalised the Eurosceptic argument by insisting that it was simply xenophobic when there seemed to me to be a good case to make both economically and in terms of our national sovereignty. What's more, according to opinion polls, most British people seemed to agree.

The panjandrum listened to my nervoususings and then held aloft Lord Pearson's latest letter and said: "Rod, you do realise that these people are mad?"

Ah, that's the BBC Desperate to be fair, according to its charter - but never truly fair. Its editorial staff are convinced that they are not remotely biased, just rational and civil and decent, and that those who oppose this congenial, educated, middle-class point of view are not merely right wing, which would be bad enough, but deranged. They will not for a second accept that they are in fact biased at all - biased not so much to the left, as some think, as to a sort of naive liberalism, a faux leftism, which inclines them always towards a sort of inchoate niceness.

The corporation's director-generals are always able to see this as a manifestation of previous, if not current, political bias. Both John Birt and Alasdair Milne accepted that the BBC had - previously - woefully misrepresented Thatcherism, the staff having been viscerally opposed to it. The current director-general, Mark Thompson, said the same thing last week - that the BBC had been biased to the left, a "massive left-wing bias", he said, but it no longer was. No, of course not, Mark. That's all gone.

Last week Thompson was caught scurrying into the office of Steve Hilton, the prime minister's head of strategy, to explain how the BBC intended to cover the coming government spending cuts - and suffered adverse publicity as a consequence.

The truth is that the BBC will cover spending cuts as it always does: it will report the misery they inflict on people, not the money saved for you and me.

This is not bias, remember. Because, as the DG has explained, the BBC is no longer biased.