

To:

(1) BBC Complaints Dept, Darlington, County Durham DL3 0UR.

[BBC Complaints - Case number/s:
CAS-6686338-M7T8X8 / CAS-6566992-X3Q7F3]

and

(2) Ofcom, Riverside House, 2a Southwark Bridge Road, London SE1 9HA.

Copies:

(1) Richard Sharp Esq., Chairman, BBC Board of Governors
Broadcasting House, Portland Place, London W1A 1AA.

(2) Tim Davie Esq., Director-General BBC,
Broadcasting House, Portland Place, London W1A 1AA.

SUBJECT:

Detailed complaint brought by Martin Webster against the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) for and on behalf of himself and the former members of the lapsed political party known as the National Front (NF) of which he was National Activities Organiser from 1969 to 1983. This complaint is also referred in identical terms to the Office of Communications (Ofcom) for its consideration as the complainant has no faith in the BBC's ability to be an impartial judge in respect of a complaint against itself and willing to impose on itself the necessary actions to correct injustices perpetrated by its employees and associated other persons.

This complaint relates to *'The Battle of Lewisham'*, presented by Nacheal Catnott, broadcast on the BBC World Service/podcast released on Friday, 9th October 2020 at 8:50am, 12:50pm and 6:50pm and on Saturday, 10th October at 3:50am and available thereafter for listening and/or download at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cszmvj> in which she interviewed Lez Henry, who was present in Lewisham on 13th August 1977, being the day that the National Front marched through the town and was opposed by violent counter-demonstrators, leading to the incident becoming known as the "Battle of Lewisham".

In support of this complaint I am attaching copies of three newspaper articles published shortly after the Lewisham march of 13th August 1977.

(a) A report covering the whole march and counter-demonstrations in Lewisham published in *The Sunday Times* the following day;

(b) An interview with Deputy Assistant Commissioner David Helm published in the *Jewish Chronicle* dated 26th August 1977;

(c) A report on the sentencing of four London youths to six years' imprisonment for conspiracy to cause grievous bodily harm and being in possession of petrol bombs at the time of their arrest in Lewisham on the day of the NF march published in *The Times* newspaper dated 2nd October 1980.

It is submitted that both the 30 working days time limit specified in the **BBC Complaints Framework** and the 1,000 word content limit do not apply to this complaint on the grounds that:

(a) there are no less than twenty eight (28) complaints embodied in this one complaint, each of which required time to assess and prepare a suitable response, and each of which could, as a separate complaint, use up to 1,000 words, making a total of up to 28,000 words. This complaint contains less than 5,000 words; and

(b) common sense dictates that it would be more convenient for all concerned to have all 28 complaints amalgamated into one complaint.

(c) in view of the above, this complaint is a wholly exceptional and serious complaint that fully justifies waiving both the 30 working days time limit and the 1,000 words content limit.

I General Complaint

(a) This programme is in breach of the BBC Charter (2016), paragraph 6 (1) and the BBC Agreement (2016), Schedule 3, paragraphs 2, 3 and 4. The only relevant voices heard were those of the presenter, Nacheal Catnott, who was openly “anti-fascist” and left wing, and the interviewee, Lez Henry, whose opinions were extremely left wing.

(b) The subject matter of the programme was a march staged by the NF in Lewisham on 13th August 1977. The duties of fairness and impartiality imposed on the BBC by its Charter (paragraph 6(1)) demand that, in such a programme, representatives from the NF be interviewed and allowed to give their accounts of the event, in order to counterbalance the views of the presenter and interviewee. It is appreciated that the format of this programme (*‘Witness to History’*) and the time allotted (10 minutes) allows for only one interviewee, in which case it should have been realised that such a controversial subject as that covered was not suitable for a programme with such a restricted format. The programme should therefore not have been made in that format.

(c) No effort was made by the programme makers to contact myself, being the person who could have not only given the NF’s viewpoint on the numerous allegations levelled at it by the presenter and interviewee but also given further, crucial, information concerning the subject matter of the programme, that would have enlightened listeners and provided them with a fairer, more complete account of what happened. I am still alive, easily contactable, and have been so contacted by BBC TV and radio producers on several occasions in the years after the NF lapsed out of existence (*circa* 1986). The last contact came from a BBC radio producer who included an interview with me in a programme about the National Socialist writer Savitri Devi broadcast about three years ago. Apart from my political involvement with the NF in the 1970s/early 1980s, I could have been a useful interviewee as I had close knowledge of the situation in S.E. London at the relevant time. I worked for more than a year (1963/1964) at the surgery of the late Dr William J. Mitchell LRCP at 387 Queen’s Road, New Cross SE14. Dr Mitchell’s GP practice had patients of all races from all parts of New Cross, Deptford and Lewisham. His partner in the practice, Dr McConnachie, was an Anglo-Indian. On several occasions during my period with the surgery I encountered elderly white female patients who had been attacked by young Black males for their handbags. These woman had been taken to the local hospital A&E in the first instance, then they resorted to Dr Mitchell for follow-up treatment. I will not forget the sight of elderly women with their faces covered with black and blue bruising. I maintained contact with Dr Mitchell’s family for decades thereafter, and thereby maintained my knowledge of goings-on in that part of London. In the 1979 general election Dr Mitchell’s son, Robert, stood as the NF candidate for Deptford winning *circa* 1,500 votes. Robert qualified as a medical doctor, became a FRCS, and married before taking up a GP practice in the north of England.

(d) The programme contained numerous factual errors which could have been easily avoided if a reasonable amount of research and fact-checking had been carried out, together with the action mentioned in paragraph (c) above.

(e) The tone of the programme implied, contrary to fact, that the National Front was a “fascist” organisation, and that it encouraged and practised violence and intimidation to achieve its objectives. This insinuation is completely false, and could have been easily rebutted had I been interviewed. In fact, the National Front was a political party that contested elections and won serious levels of support, being arguably at that

time Britain's third party, not (as implied) a mere street gang. For example, almost 120,000 Londoners voted for the National Front at the GLC elections on 5th May 1977, just three months before the "Battle of Lewisham", and in parliamentary by-elections (Stechford and Ladywood) shortly before and after the "Battle" the National Front polled ahead of the Liberal Party (now the Liberal Democrats). So far from being "smashed" by the "Battle of Lewisham" as the programme-makers suggested, the NF was able to nominate 303 candidates in the 1979 general election. Further, the NF had a comprehensive Constitution which provided for:

- a governing body (the National Directorate) a third of the places on which fell vacant every year and were filled by an annual postal ballot of the entire membership of the party;
- an Annual General Meeting at which all members were entitled to attend and vote on resolutions concerning the party's policies and Constitution submitted by a sufficient number of members;
- a constitution for branches requiring annual elections for posts on branch committees.

(f) The interviewee made serious and unsubstantiated allegations against the NF, its members and supporters, including allegations of violence, intimidation and other unlawful activities, which were unchallenged by the presenter. Again, my inclusion as an interviewee on the programme would have provided a counterbalance to the extreme left-wing presenter and interviewee, as well as further, vital, information that would have given a fairer account to listeners of the event covered. For example, I append a copy of page 4 of *The Times* dated 22nd October 1980 reporting on the sentencing of four London youths to six years' imprisonment for conspiracy to cause grievous bodily harm and being in possession of petrol bombs at the time of their arrest in Lewisham on the day of the National Front march on 13th August 1977. Note that "the prosecution said that they intended to use the petrol bombs on some of the marchers" (i.e. NF members and supporters).

II Detailed complaints, all of which breach paragraph 6 (1) of the BBC Charter (2016)

The web page hosting the podcast

1. The short description on the web page hosting the podcast runs as follows:

"How anti-racists stopped a far-right march in South London in 1977, preventing the National Front from entering the British political mainstream."

The expanded version of this reads, in part,

"...the National Front were forced to withdraw. The so-called Battle of Lewisham is now seen as having halted the rise of the far-right in British politics."

Both of these statements are untrue.

2. The epithet "far-right" in the shorter version is subjective and a matter of opinion, and not appropriate on a web page of the BBC, which has a duty to be unbiased.

3. The march was not stopped. Police reacted to a riot staged by a violent and intimidating mob of "anti-racists" by directing the marchers to vary their route. This was agreed by the NF in order to keep injuries and damage to public property caused by the "anti-racists" to a minimum.

4. The use of the words "far-right" in the expanded version are inappropriate for the reasons set out in 2 above.

The programme itself

[Please note that the times given refer to the time elapsed, to the nearest couple of seconds, from the start of the programme.]

5. 0:28 The presenter says, "...the racist National Front are planning a massive show of strength..."

The presenter thereby immediately set out her credentials as being extremely left wing by inserting the inappropriate and unnecessary adjective, "racist", in referring to the NF. Whether the NF is or was "racist" is a matter of opinion, and the presenter should not have allowed her personal opinions to colour the content of her broadcast.

6. The National Front were not planning a "massive show of strength", but rather seeking to draw national attention to the serious problem of young black men mugging elderly white women in places like Lewisham – something that neither the presenter nor her interviewee referred to in the whole broadcast. Why not?

In support of my point, I refer to the report of the march published by *The Sunday Times* of 14th August 1977 and in particular the following two paragraphs:

"The area was chosen for a march by the National Front to capitalise on a genuine fear in the neighbourhood. Among its slogans were those underlining the fact that a police survey of street crime in South London completed in 1974 showed that 80 per cent of the attackers were black and 85 per cent of the victims were white.

"There is solid right-wing support in the Clifton Rise area. In a by-election for the local council last year, votes for the National Front and the National Party totalled more than those of the successful Labour candidate."

This *Sunday Times* report was compiled by no less than five senior reporters who were unbiased and in no way sympathetic to the NF. The presenter should have come across this report during her research for the programme. Either she failed to locate the report, in which case she is clearly incapable of compiling a programme such as this, or she deliberately suppressed knowledge of its existence from her listeners, thereby betraying the trust placed in her by her listeners to provide them with full and unbiased information on the subject in accordance with the BBC's Charter referred to in the General Complaint I (a) above.

7. 0:38 The interviewee says, "...when we heard all the noise round the corner where the flares an' the smoke bombs were bein' thrown ..."

This statement clearly implies that the violence and the smoke bombs were the work of NF members and supporters. In fact, all the violence, including smoke bombs and other missiles, came from the counter-demonstrators of the far left. The presenter should have made this clear from the start, but, instead, chose to mislead listeners. She might have taken note of an interview, published in the *Jewish Chronicle* of August 26th 1977, of Deputy Assistant Commissioner David Helm, in which he said:

"There is no difficulty in policing a Front demonstration on its own - t's only when there is opposition that you get violence.'

This report also gives us the following information:

"On the Saturday at Lewisham', said Mr Helm, the National Front had obeyed directions all along the line. Before August 13 their march was curtailed. On the day they were formed up on a different route and were diverted three times - and there were no problems.

“ They were displaying posters which were anti-mugging, which could have incited racial hatred. They were asked not to display them and they didn’t.

***“ Compare this with the complete refusal by the SWP and the All Lewisham Campaign against Racism and Fascism marches to agree a route with the police and the subsequent dispersal of the ALCARAF people so that they could go to where the Front rally was starting’.*”**

I attach to this complaint a copy of that interview, which should be read in its entirety because many of the assertions made by the presenter and interviewee were, in effect, anticipated by him and refuted.

8. 1:05 The presenter alleges that Henry grew up experiencing “racist abuse from the National Front thugs and some white people in his neighbourhood” with no evidence to substantiate this. Given that he had just turned 20 years of age when the Lewisham march took place, he would have been nine and a half by the time the NF was even formed, in January 1967. The use of the term “thugs” in describing NF supporters is grossly misleading, and it is averred, was put in to mislead listeners.

9. :29 The interviewee says, “...this white guy smashed me straight in the face wiv a bit of wood. He actually knocked at least one of my teeth out ...” This allegation of a serious assault is accepted at face value by the presenter because it suits her case. But it needs corroboration, of which there is none.

- (a) Was the assault reported to the police?
- (b) Was anyone arrested for it?
- (c) Did any prosecution follow?
- (d) Why can’t Henry remember how many of his teeth were knocked out?
- (e) His overall description of the assault does not sound credible. The presenter should have pressed him for further details but failed to do so.

10. 2:24 The interviewee says, “...For us it was just a very hostile environment. You know, there were no-go areas for black people. It was quite commonplace for us to be abused on our way to school...”

These are vague allegations which, even if true, were not crimes. The presenter failed to bring in a different viewpoint of what it was like to be growing up in Britain generally, and in Lewisham in particular, at that time.

11. 2:50 The presenter says, “...the National Front seemed to be getting their racist message into the political mainstream ...often insulting black passers-by and handing out racist propaganda”.

The use of the terms “racist message” and “often insulting black passers-by and handing out racist propaganda” can only come from an extreme left wing person, not an unbiased broadcaster.

(a) Where is the evidence for these insults?

(b) As for handing out “racist propaganda”, this is what only extreme left wing people would call it. The rest of us call it the exercise of freedom of expression in support of patriotism. I submit that this is another example of left wing bias.

12. 3:11 The interviewee says, “If you went to Lewisham market, at the end of where them stalls would be you would get a line-up of members of the National Front. A lot of them were skinheads ... and they would get away with it they knew that if they were confronted by black people and the police were round the police would actually come and defend them anyway so leadin’ up to the Ba’le of Lewisham there was a lot of tension and the National Front became involved.”

This incoherent rant went completely unchallenged by the presenter. No-one was brought in to challenge this interviewee. He was free to make a string of serious allegations (including one against the police) without a shred of evidence to support them. The presenter should have asked the interviewee to provide examples of what he alleged, but failed to do so.

13. 3:42 The presenter says, "Although there was an obvious danger of violence, the National Front march was allowed to go ahead in Lewisham on August 13th 1977. Suspecting the police would not defend them, community leaders advised black people to avoid the route."

Here, the presenter invites listeners to accept that the mere threat of violence from counter-demonstrators should be enough to require the police to ban a march. The presenter's second sentence implies that the black people of Lewisham needed "defending" from NF marchers, in spite of a complete lack of evidence of this ever being required, at Lewisham or elsewhere. The presenter should have presented evidence that "community leaders advised black people to avoid the route" if, indeed, that was the case, but she failed to do so.

Neither the presenter nor the interviewee mentioned an extremely important and highly relevant legal action that had taken place in the High Court for a full week in the period immediately before the Lewisham march.

Lewisham Borough Council had made an application to the High Court for an Order of Mandamus against the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, David McNee, to force him to use his powers to ban the forthcoming march on the grounds that violence and destruction of property were bound to occur. Mr McNee opposed the application and won his case. He thereby retained his statutory powers to decide whether or not to ban the march, and he chose to let it go ahead.

This was a massive defeat for the forces of the Left who were determined to stop the march from taking place, and it was inflicted by:

- (a) a judge of the High Court, who had spent days listening to submissions from both sides of the argument and drawing his own conclusions, and
- (b) the Metropolitan Police Commissioner.

As a result, the Left formed an umbrella organisation called the "All Lewisham Campaign Against Racism and Facism" (ALCARAF) to promote counter-demonstrations against the march at broadly the same time and place as the march itself. It included the Bishop of Southwark, Mervyn Stockwood, a self-confessed member of the Communist Party at the time, as well as Martin Savitt, the Chairman of the Board of Deputies of British Jews. I refer, again, to the report published by *The Sunday Times* on the following day.

I submit that the reason why neither the presenter nor the interviewee mentioned this "elephant in the room" event was that it would have undermined their case that the march should have been banned and that the threat of violence came only from the NF. They chose to mislead their audience and future historians rather than publish the truth.

14. 3:55 The interviewee says, "A lot of these right wing racist groups they would go to these things they would be tooled up and they would be prepared because a lot of them were football fans and that's what a lot of the football fans used to do anyway. They would bring that kinda football thug mentali'y to these marches. We were basically told, "Stay away". An' there were loads an' loads of black people who were terrified of them."

(a) Where is the evidence that NF marchers were ever “tooled up” (i.e. in possession of offensive weapons) at NF activities?

(b) Where is the evidence that “loads and loads” of black people were “terrified” of NF marchers?

(c) Again, the presenter completely failed to challenge this interviewee about his wild accusations.

15. 4:30 The interviewee says, “we’re just gonna let the white man dem fight the white man”.

If a white man were to say the same thing, but substituting “white” for “black”, it would be deemed “racist”. The presenter should not have allowed this comment to remain in the programme.

16. 4:52 The presenter says, “When about five hundred National Front members reached the outskirts of Lewisham...”.

Her estimate of the numbers involved are inaccurate. She failed to research independent accounts of the number of marchers and counter-demonstrators.

17. NF marchers assembled close to the start-off point of the march - not on the outskirts of Lewisham. The presenter should have checked these facts with myself - the person who organised the march - and with contemporary press reports such as that contained in *The Sunday Times* of 14th August 1977 (the day following the Lewisham march) but evidently failed to do so.

18. 5:15 The interviewee says, “You had loads of anti-fascists who were there an' ready to fight. I saw people chucking stuff. I'm sure it was red and blue flares they were chucking at the National Front but it was tangible and the fear from them was palpable you could actually feel it an'....black boys we just laughed.”

The first sentence strongly implies that violence was to be used against the marchers. This is in stark contrast to the tone of the programme that NF marchers themselves were the source of the violence. The presenter failed to press the interviewee to justify this remark. Again, I refer to the interview published in the *Jewish Chronicle* of August 26th 1977 of Deputy Assistant Commissioner David Helm.

19. 5:39 The interviewee says, “We just thought look these are the people who go around terrorising people cowering and hiding behind the police.” This is a double-lie. The presenter failed to ask the interviewee to substantiate his claim that the NF “are the people who go around terrorising people”, or to obtain and present independent evidence that the marchers were “cowering and hiding behind the police”.

20. 5:45 “We're out to get the Nazis...” This is the cry of a mob ready to use violence against the marchers, yet no comment is made on this aspect by the presenter. Why not?

21. 5:47 An unnamed radio/TV reporter says, “Again the police move in to make snatch arrests. It seems that the police have effectively stopped the counter-demonstration from reaching the National Front marchers.”

This commentary confirms that it was the leftist mob that was trying to confront the marchers and use violence on them, but there is no comment on this from the presenter. Why not?

22. 6:02 The interviewee says, “The police crea’ed a cordon aroun' the National Front that no-one could really get to this (sic).”

Henry thereby confirms that it was the police cordon that prevented the mob from engaging in mass violence against the marchers. Why did not the presenter press Henry on the illegality of what the counter-demonstrators were trying to do?

23. 6:07 The interviewee says, "I saw that National Front people bein' dragged outta the crowd. I fink that most o' what I witnessed was when the police actually star'ed to disperse the National Front some of the anarchists started to attack members of the National Front."

What is this but more confirmation that it was the leftist mob that were initiating all the violence? Yet there was no reaction from the presenter. Why not?

24. 6:20 The presenter says, "There were 4,000 police officers on duty at Lewisham. They escorted the National Front racists out of Lewisham and onto buses and trains out of London. The far right had been prevented from holding their march. But at that point the situation took another violent turn. In the confusion a false rumour spread that the National Front were heading into Lewisham town centre. Some of the black community - not Lez, but a few of his friends - went there to confront them."

Here, the presenter gives a completely false account of what happened. The police did not escort the marchers (note the word "racists" used by the presenter again, to describe the marchers) "out of Lewisham and onto buses and trains out of London". Listeners are invited to believe that the marchers were sent packing. Why was this falsehood present in the programme?

In reality, the marchers dispersed at the conclusion of their rally and made their own way home. They had **not** been prevented from holding their march. *The Sunday Times* report of the following day says:

"There [Cressingham Road] they held a rally unmolested and then dispersed".

The presenter's last sentence in this part of the broadcast confirms that it was the leftist mob that sought confrontation and violence.

The presenter failed to research independent accounts of what happened at the end of the rally held by the NF, instead, accepting without question, a false account, given to her, presumably, by the interviewee. I refer, again, to *The Sunday Times* report, a copy of which is attached.

25. 6:55 The interviewee says, "That's when some skirmishes kicked off between the black boys and the police, and that's when they got the riot shields out for the first time in UK mainland history that the police used riot shields against members of the communi'y so I know that these were the fings used in Northern Ireland I believe at the time but they did that in Lewisham an' I believe that the police were also charging at people with their horses."

It was more than "some skirmishes". A skirmish is a "piece of irregular or unpremeditated fighting esp. between small or outlying parties, slight engagement..." (*Concise Oxford Dictionary* 1982). This was a full-scale riot, hence the deployment of riot shields to protect police officers from bricks, bottles, etc, thrown by the rioting mob, and not "against members of the commun'y", as this interviewee, and the presenter, would have us believe. This was a deliberate attempt to downplay the violence emanating from the leftist mob. The presenter should have obtained independent evidence, such as *The Sunday Times* account referred to at 24 above, of what happened during and after the march.

26. 7:27 The presenter says, "In total, 214 people were arrested that day and over a hundred injured, half of them police officers. For the National Front it was a

humiliation, and the battle was now seen as having halted the rise of the far right in Britain.”

The presenter's comments in the second sentence are pure speculation and personal opinion without any supporting evidence, in line with most of the rest of this broadcast. Again, I refer to the report published in *The Sunday Times* on the following day. She failed to research and produce evidence of the effect of the march on

- (a) the policing of demonstrations and marches in Britain,
- (b) the National Front,
- (c) the opponents of the National Front.

27. 7:41 The interviewee says, “The National Front died that day. They fort that more ordinary white people would come out and support them but for me impor'an'ly ordinary people got to see that basically they were a bunch of cowards, and why would you be afraid of cowards? So the terror that they wielded in places like Lewisham died that day. Their credibili'y went to zero. They basically vanished.”

This is another unsupported opinion that the presenter (and producer) allowed to go unchallenged. She failed to research and obtain evidence to support or contest the interviewee’s contention. And, as I have recorded in **I (e)** above: “... in parliamentary by-elections (Stechford and Ladywood) shortly before and after the ‘Battle’ the National Front polled ahead of the Liberal Party (now the Liberal Democrats). So far from being ‘smashed’ by the ‘Battle of Lewisham’ as the programme-makers suggested, the NF was able to nominate 303 candidates in the 1979 general election.”

28. 8:17 The interviewee says, “It's kinda bi'er-sweet really for me because on the one hand the over-racist presence vanished but I fink it became replaced by something far more insidious, which is what we experience now. In some ways it was easier for us as black youf then we had an identifiable enemy wheveer they were dressed up as skinheads or whatever oh you could tell by their looks, you could tell by their a'i'tude but now it's more covert so I actually fink it's probably a more worrying time.”

This is just a rant that is not worthy of comment. Why did the presenter not press the interviewee to be more specific? In failing to do so she failed the listeners and the BBC itself.

There are twenty eight (28) points of complaint made above about this programme, some of them in the form of questions. In the interests of justice and in order to display the BBC’s impartiality I demand that

- (a) this podcast be withdrawn from the BBC’s archives and no longer made available for downloading or listening to;
- and
- (b) consideration be given to the preparation of a fresh programme dealing with the same subject but including someone such as myself, who was involved intimately with the subject matter covered, to give the true facts and answer questions from an unbiased presenter.

Dated: Wednesday 28th July 2021.

Signed:

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