

British Polling Council

30 March 2020

The Rt Hon the Lord McFall of Alcluith,
Chair of the Liaison Committee.
House of Lords,
London SW1A 0PW

My Lord,

Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media

Thank you for your letter (undated, but received 27 February) in which you requested a written update on how the British Polling Council (BPC) has responded to the recommendations of the Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media. I am now happy to do so following an annual general meeting of the Council on 16 March at which, inter alia, some of the relevant issues were addressed.

First of all, you asked about how the BPC has responded to three specific recommendations made by the Select Committee.

1. Developing the BPC 'Journalists' Guide to Opinion Polls'. The Council agreed at its AGM in 2019 that it would produce a revised guide, but progress was delayed by the heavy workload created by the Brexit impasse during the rest of the year. In the meantime, an initiative was taken by the Market Research Society (MRS) and IMPRESS to produce such a guide. This document was put out to consultation in November (after the general election was called), and I was pleased as President of the BPC to speak at an event in London at which the document was launched. The Council also advertised the document on its own website. The MRS/IMPRESS document provides much detailed guidance and is attractively and arrestingly designed. It is, however, a very detailed document and we are not sure that it will always match the attention span of a busy journalist. Consequently, the BPC has drafted a shorter guide that can be read in five minutes and is aimed at a journalist who is unfamiliar with polling but who is now faced with the task of writing a poll-based story. The guide explains how polls work, their strengths and limitations, and how they can go wrong. It also outlines the technical detail that a good report should include. A draft of the text was approved in principle at the 2020 AGM, and, following some amendment, is now being placed in the hands of a professional designer so that it can be mounted with due publicity on the BPC website.
2. Calling out instances of poor reporting of polls. The BPC decided at its 2019 AGM that it was not the appropriate organisation to take the lead in any such initiative. It is a body whose central role is to enforce standards of transparency in its own industry rather than one that attempts to monitor the conduct of another profession

that is already well equipped with regulators. Moreover, engaging as an organisation in potentially public criticism of the professional work of others would potentially expose it to the risk of legal action for defamation, against which it is not insured. That said, as the production of its Journalists' Guide illustrates, the BPC is keen to promote good practice in the reporting of polls, and is happy to assist IPSO, IMPRESS or OfCom in any initiative that they may wish to take in the pursuit of that objective.

3. Developing (with others) training opportunities for journalists. Individuals within BPC member companies already contribute to some journalist training, including most notably the course provided at City University. But individual collaborations such as these can do little more than scratch the surface. It strikes us that if a systematic attempt is to be made to enhance the training of journalists in this area, then any action needs to be undertaken by those who are responsible at the national level for the provision and accreditation of courses in journalism. To that end, we have written to both the Broadcast Journalism Training Council and the National Council for the Training of Journalists asking that we might liaise with them about the current level of relevant provision and whether or not there might be ways in which it could be improved. At the time of writing we are awaiting a reply to my letter – doubtless any progress that might otherwise have been made by now has been delayed by the public health crisis.

Meanwhile, you also referred in your letter to para 234 of the Select Committee report that suggested that there should be an expansion of the BPC's remit, and made a number of specific suggestions to that end, including some that are already covered by the points above. The BPC has taken action on a number of points. In particular, it has attempted to improve the effectiveness of its complaints procedure by providing advice on how to make a complaint and indicated that any complaint needs to be made on the basis of an alleged breach of the BPC's rules on transparency, while directing readers to the bodies that are responsible for enforcing professional standards in the conduct of polls and the regulation of broadcast and press journalism. Meanwhile, the BPC conducted an internal review of the conduct of the polls in 2017 (which helped ensure that many of the mistakes that were made on that occasion were not repeated in 2019), which will now be combined and published in tandem with a similar review of what happened in 2019.

The Select Committee's comments at para 234 suggest that the Council should also become a body that acts as an advice centre on the conduct of individual polls. Any such step could certainly well represent a significant extension of the BPC's role. At present, the Council is careful to make it clear that membership of the body does not confer any seal of quality approval – but rather a commitment to transparency in the conduct and reporting of polls such that anyone can make an informed judgement about the quality of any piece of work. Moreover, it is important to be aware that, as in any profession, there is often honest and reasonable disagreement about what methodological approaches are 'best', while innovation continues apace. Meanwhile, to date at least, Council members have not indicated that they feel the need for or would use any such advice service.

At para 234, the Select Committee also suggested that the BPC should require its members to declare the full details of all sources of funding for its polls. This recommendation seems to have arisen out of an unsubstantiated and unspecific claim from one witness to the committee (para. 192). Here it is perhaps worth bearing in mind that the answer to the question, 'who funded this poll?', is often the polling company itself using its own resources (including, of course, profits made from private polls). A significant amount of the polling of attitudes towards Brexit during last year's political crisis was undertaken by individual companies on that basis, and in so doing they arguably performed a valuable public service in helping the public and policy makers to understand how voters were reacting towards one of the most important public policy decisions Britain has taken since 1945. Now, most recently, the industry has been quick to undertake unfunded work on attitudes towards the COVID19 epidemic, when keeping the public onside will be crucial to the success of the measures that are taken. Perhaps the lesson is that the concern about standards in the conduct and reporting of polls that the Select Committee rightly expressed needs to be weighed against the potential of polls on occasion to contribute to the effective development and implementation of important public policy.

All of this said, we have decided that the BPC should become a more active and actively managed body, albeit within the terms of its existing remit. During the last year, for example, it has advised its members on the implications of the Financial Conduct Authority guidance on polls and market abuse, and issued advice on the reporting of the responses to polls after excluding 'Don't Knows'. It has also revised its transparency regulations to take account of the increased use of modelling, most notably multi-level regression and post-stratification. Meanwhile, rather than, as hitherto, simply responding to relevant business as it arises, the officers of the council are now meeting on a regular basis to review and progress its business.

I hope these comments are helpful. I will, of course, be happy to appear before the Committee as a witness (as originally intended) when the business of the House returns to normal.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Sir John Curtice
President