



A Barrel of Laughs:
the BBC, diversity, & comedy

About Us

The Campaign for Common Sense (CCS) exists to bring together those who want to have grown up discussion and debate.

We will conduct research, and organise events online and across the country, involving experts in all fields and bring them to the widest possible audience.

We will be champions for free speech and tolerance

We believe that...

...nobody has a monopoly on what is right and wrong.

...we all have far more in common than it sometimes seems.

...common sense and fair play are the best way to approach controversial Issues.

...sensitive topics should be discussed frankly & calmly, without trading insults.

Table of Contents

Foreword - Mark Lehain	4
Summary	5
Methodology	7
Recommendations	9
Appendix	10

Foreword

Mark Lehain

The BBC lies at the heart of so many elements of the cultural life of the UK. And there are few sectors where its influence is more important than in comedy.

The artists discovered and nurtured over the decades are too numerous to list here.

The BBC is one of the few organisations with the resources and clout to break acts and take them through from open mic slots to nationwide audiences.

Whether it's institutions like *Just a Minute* or *Have I Got News For You*, more recent staples such as *Mock the Week* or *The Now Show*, or one-off specials online or elsewhere – the BBC's ability to showcase talent is almost unique.

Many household names today owe their living to appearances on one of the broadcaster's many comedy programmes.

However, there has long been a feeling that comedians of a left-liberal leaning seem to get disproportionate airtime.

This report's analysis suggests that there is something to this.

It was certainly the case in the month of November – the overwhelming majority of comedians given spots appear to be left-wing, anti-Brexit, or “woke”.

Now, these are perfectly valid and widely held views. It may be that the current crop of comedians hold them, and the BBC's choices just reflect that. As long as those chosen are funny, it maybe doesn't matter.



But given the BBC's unique position and resources, its stated diversity goals, and its role in the talent pipeline, it is worrying that the range of views held by the artists and acts it uses is so unbalanced and does not reflect in any way those of the intended audience – the UK population.

It's not as if there aren't talented visible alternatives either. Whether they're finding an outlet online, or performing at the sellout Comedy Unleashed nights in London every month, comics are already challenging the politically correct orthodoxy. The Beeb should play its part in this too.

The BBC's future is under debate right now. It has committed both to appealing to a wider audience and increasing the diversity of its people.

In this regard, and as this report shows, when it comes to comedy, it certainly has its work cut out. We wish it well.

Summary

The BBC has a problem with the limited range of comedians it gives profile to.

During November we recorded which comedians appeared on BBC 1, BBC 2, and Radio 4¹, and researched their public stance on politics, Brexit, and identity politics (“woke”).

Our findings:

- There were **364** slots filled by **141** different comedians.
- **268** of the slots – **74%** - were taken by comedians with publicly pronounced left-leaning, or anti-Brexit , or “woke” persuasions.
- **99** of the comedians booked – **70%** - were of these persuasions.
- Only **4** slots (**1.1%**) were given to the **2** comedians in this list who are explicitly conservative, pro-Brexit or anti-“woke”.

In a whole range of areas the BBC has stated that it wishes to increase the diversity of output and talent employed. Comedy is clearly one where it has lots of work to do.

But it must go further than just diversifying the protected characteristics or backgrounds of people – diversity of outlook and values is vital too.

To be clear: left-wing or anti-Brexit or “woke” views are entirely legitimate and valid, and are held by significant proportions of the population! Obviously comics with these opinions should be booked – but there needs to be better balance, and artists with alternative viewpoints should get a fair share of appearances.

¹ Methodology explained in the next section of the report

And it is not like there aren't talented comics out there who hold small-c conservative, anti-“woke”, or pro-Brexit views. There are loads - for instance, those who perform at the sellout Comedy Unleashed nights every month. The issue is that they just aren't getting booked.

This is an easy issue to remedy, and we hope that under the new Director General Tim Davie, the BBC makes a concerted effort to put diversity of outlook and values – true diversity – at the heart of its comedy programming.

With this in mind, we recommend that to ensure a better diversity and balance of values and viewpoints in its comedy output, the BBC should:

- 1) Make an explicit, concerted, and sustained effort to identify new comedy talent of a non-“woke”, non-left leaning stance
- 2) Increase the number and proportion of programmes produced, and comedians employed, which are explicitly non-“woke” or non-left leaning in stance by 2023
- 3) Encourage producers to book better balanced panels of comedians
- 4) Report annually on how it is performing against these targets, and explain what it is doing to meet them over time.

Methodology

An exercise like this is not an exact science. There is inevitably some subjectivity when choosing which programmes to include, or which category someone's public pronouncements belong to. We have done our best to judge this appropriately but fully appreciate that others might have made different decisions.

In addition, the analysis was only conducted for a single calendar month, towards the end of a year where production was disrupted by the pandemic. We recognise that we are not necessarily dealing with a typical set of outputs.

However, we do believe that our approach provides a reasonably reliable picture of the BBC's comedy output in general terms.

What we wanted to find out:

- What proportion of BBC slots taken by comedians are filled by those with left-leaning, anti-Brexit, or "woke" views
- What proportion of BBC slots taken by comedians are filled by those without publicly stated left-leaning, or anti-Brexit, or "woke" views
- What proportion of BBC slots taken by comedians are filled by those with publicly stated right-leaning, or pro-Brexit, or anti-"woke" views.

What we did:

- For November 1st to November 30th, we identified every comedy programme broadcast on BBC 1, BBC 2, and Radio 4, plus appearances by comedians on other shows e.g. chat or review shows
 - o *we included* repeats
 - o *we excluded*
 - sitcoms and dramas
 - programmes that were purely compilations/clips eg QI XS
 - very old episodes e.g. Just a Minute from 2001
- listed the programme concerned, plus the names of comedians who appeared on them

- we excluded show hosts if they weren't there as a comedian as such
- researched comedians' public views on 3 topics:
 - these were
 - general politics – were they left-leaning / anti-Conservative?
 - Brexit – were they anti-Brexit?
 - “woke” – e.g., did they promote or endorse identity politic issues?
 - We used Google and their social media accounts to explore public statements or views on the above themes
 - if an individual clearly held one or more of the three kinds of views above, we scored them a 1, otherwise we scored them 0.

What we found:

- There were 364 slots filled by 141 different comedians.
- 268 of the slots – 74% - were taken by comedians with publicly pronounced left-leaning, anti-Brexit , or “woke” persuasions.
- 99 of the comedians booked – or 70% - were of these persuasions.
- Only 4 slots (1.1%) were given to the 2 comedians in this list who are explicitly conservative, pro-Brexit or anti-“woke”.

Recommendations

We recommend that to ensure a better diversity and balance of values and viewpoints in its comedy output, the BBC should:

- 1) Make an explicit, concerted, and sustained effort to identify new comedy talent of a non-“woke”, non-left leaning stance
- 2) Increase the number and proportion of programmes produced, and comedians employed, which are explicitly non-“woke” or non-left leaning in stance by 2023
- 3) Encourage producers to book better balanced panels of comedians
- 4) Report annually on how it is performing against these targets, and explain what it is doing to meet them over time.

Appendix

Alternative Comedians that could be booked:

Name	Examples
Andrew Doyle	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tr7vQHOTO-A
Titania McGrath	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5N8ibiR9o0&t=116s
Leo Kears	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36Yfy0Aub1c&t=1198s
Joleed Farah	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLbLZTOM4y4
Nicholas de Santo	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8PEejozFLO
Andrew Lawrence	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBKR94erU1g
Nick Dixon	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crhvwfX8CLQ&t=54s
Mary Bourke	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aN-VHsliOtw
Scott Capurro	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2U74s0-GaQ
Tania Edwards	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdtTJgfcES8
Dominic Frisby	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ds9u0O6X8o&t=45s
Geoff Norcott	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujw29JC6S0A&t=75s
Alistair Williams	https://twitter.com/awilliamscomedy/status/1115925229338025984
Simon Evans	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBudGOfNnac
Lee Hurst	https://twitter.com/LeeHurstComic
Steve Hughes	https://youtu.be/fHMoDt3nSHs