

[IE] “Robust” questioning by interviewer was not unfair

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The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) has rejected a complaint against the broadcaster Newstalk, over a programme interviewer’s “robust” questioning of an interviewee. The decision arose following a complaint in relation to a May 2015 edition of the Newstalk Breakfast show, a current affairs programme broadcast each morning from 07.00 - 10.00. The show featured an interview with David Quinn, head of the religious advocacy group “The Iona Institute”, which was arguing against the then forthcoming same-sex marriage referendum.

The complainant argued that the presenter “went beyond his remit as ‘Devil’s Advocate’”, when he asked Quinn “do you have a problem with gay people”, which was “invidious and unfair and left Mr. Quinn having to deny he was homophobic”. The complainant also argued that the presenter referred to a tweet Quinn had written on Twitter about the “pregnancy announcement of a gay work colleague of the programme presenter”, which the complainant argued was “impartial” and represented a “conflict of interest.”

It was argued that there had been a violation of two rules under the BAI’s Code of Fairness, Objectivity & Impartiality in News and Current Affairs, namely Rule 4.3, which reads “A broadcaster shall deal fairly with contributors to current affairs content or with persons or organisations referred to in that content”; and Rule 4.25, which reads “Each broadcaster shall have and implement appropriate policies and procedures to address any conflicts of interests that may exist or arise in respect of anyone with an editorial involvement in any news or current affairs content, whether such person works on-air or off-air”.

The BAI rejected the complaint, holding that there had been no violation of the BAI’s Code. First, the BAI noted that “the Code requires the presenter to take care that their approach to an interview, including their tone, does not result in unfairness”. However, the presenter’s “tone and approach, while robust”, did not prevent Quinn from setting out his views, given the interview lasted 30 minutes. Second, the BAI held that no conflict of interest arose over discussion of Quinn’s tweet on the presenter’s colleague, as “the tweet was in the public domain and had been the subject of previous coverage. The contents of the tweet were also deemed relevant to the programme discussion”. Accordingly, the complaint was rejected.

Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, Broadcasting Complaint Decisions, December 2015, p. 60

<http://www.bai.ie/?ddownload=128610>

