

Interview of Pat Cox was 'one-sided' and 'unfair'

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In interview conducted by the RTE broadcaster, Marian Finucane, with the aspirant [Fine Gael](#) presidential candidate Pat Cox, during which he gave a "partisan and patronising lecture to the nation", has been found to be unfair, partial and lacking in objectivity. Yesterday the anti-EU campaigner who brought the complaint to the Broadcasting Authority of [Ireland](#) (BAI) said he was "rather surprised" by the ruling in his favour. He said he had expected it to be rejected "especially as it involved such a well-known ultra-europhile as Mr Cox, who is now seeking the [Fine Gael](#) nomination for the Presidency". Anthony Coughlan told the Sunday Independent that he happened to hear accidentally Mr Cox's "lengthy exposition of the background to our current troubles" on Saturday, April 2. He described it as "extraordinarily unctuous, patronising, unbalanced and designed above all to deflect criticisms away from EU institutions, and particularly the [European Central Bank](#)". The BAI ruled that the broadcast treatment of a "major issue of public concern and consequence" resulted in one view being given prominence without ensuring the alternative viewpoints were fairly represented. The ruling will come as something of an embarrassment for Ms Finucane, who is one of RTE's best paid stars. However, Mr Coughlan, in his letter of complaint, said he had "no wish to cause Ms Finucane personally or indeed her generally highly regarded programme embarrassment". A director of the National Platform EU Research & Information Centre, Mr Coughlan was at pains to point out to the BAI that he did not make "complaints frivolously or for the sake of drawing attention to matters of a minor or trivial character". In the mid-1990s, Mr Coughlan brought a complaint which ultimately led to a successful action in the High Court and Supreme Court regarding the allocation of political broadcasts in referendums. Current members of the BAI include chairperson [Bob Collins](#), a former director general of RTE; Larry Bass, the well-known independent producer; [John Waters](#), a newspaper columnist; and Colum Kenny, a university lecturer and columnist with the Sunday Independent. The complaint was adjudicated upon by the BAI's eight-person compliance committee, on which [Mr Waters](#) also sits. Mr Coughlan submitted that the interview, without anyone present or included to give counter views of "key disputed issues" in the development of Ireland's banking crisis, gave Mr Cox the opportunity to "present a significantly one-sided and unbalanced account", which was "misleading in important respects". In particular, he said, by omitting certain facts and misstating others, Mr Cox's "unchallenged presentation sought to deny or deflect any criticism from the EU and the eurozone authorities as being significantly responsible for Ireland's banking crisis and to state or imply that it was solely or mainly Ireland's own fault". He further submitted that the failure to include "another discussant" who was, "not, like Mr Cox, an avowed proponent of, and apologist for, even further EU integration", and the "related failure to indicate to listeners that any attempt would be made to remedy this omission", meant that listeners were presented with an account that was "significantly misleading, partisan, unbalanced, lacking in objectivity and unfair". RTE contended that Ms Finucane conducted an "informed and thorough" interview showing no evidence of "bias or personal political views". RTE did not accept that an alternative viewpoint was required. It said that regular listeners were fully aware that the Saturday edition was always a single interview, a well-established current affairs format widely recognised as legitimate. The broadcaster said Mr Cox was an appropriate person to invite on to the programme. His career gave him a "unique perspective" on Ireland and the EU. The reason he was invited was that there was a "widespread perception" that Ireland had been "badly treated" by the EU. Mr Cox seemed like the "ideal person" to address those concerns. During the interview, Ms Finucane asked numerous questions relating to the role of the ECB in the overheating of the property market and the "intransigent stance" on Ireland having to carry the full cost of banking debt. She had also read out a series of listener comments, all of which were in opposition to the points raised by Mr Cox. The BAI, in its ruling, respected the right of RTE to freedom of expression, but said it was also obliged to recognise the public interest. It noted that the format "differed somewhat" from the regular slot of the profile interview, and also noted the importance and consequences of the subject matter and the absence of another interviewee. In these circumstances, it took the view that there was a "greater onus" on RTE to challenge Mr Cox's views and to ensure that alternative views on [Europe](#) and the topics under discussion were adequately presented. This onus was not discharged. It was incumbent on RTE to ensure, on a matter of enormous current public concern, that all sides of the issue were addressed fairly. It noted that contributors to the programme over the past two years had voiced the opinions raised by Mr Coughlan. It also noted that, in her introduction, Ms Finucane referred to Mr Cox as "really a Mr Europe for a very long time". But no wider context was referred to by her in the course

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of the programme and no wider context was "sufficiently argued" in the broadcaster's response. Therefore, the only broadcast relevant was The Marian Finucane Show on April 2. The committee was of the view that the content of the discussion amounted to a "one-sided viewpoint" on issues concerning the economic crisis. "In this instance, the broadcast treatment of a major issue of public concern and consequence resulted in one view being given prominence without ensuring that alternative viewpoints were fairly represented. "The programme was not fair to all interests concerned and accordingly, the complaint was upheld with regard to the fairness, objectivity and impartiality requirements of the Broadcasting Act, 2009." - JODY CORCORAN