

THE BBC and 'EUROPE'

BBC News Coverage of the
2015 UK General Election
March 30 – May 10, 2015
- Preliminary Findings –

Programmes Covered:

“Today”

“World at One”

“News at Ten”

“Newsnight”

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BBC News Coverage of the 2015 General Election (March 30 – May 15) “Today”, “World at One”, “News at Ten” and “Newsnight”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

News-watch research indicates that across the four highest-profile BBC news and current affairs programmes, coverage of the EU during the 2015 General Election between March 30 and May 10 was extremely limited and did not sufficiently convey to audiences the issues involved.

Policies and attitudes towards the EU were a central point of difference between the political parties, with their respective approaches potentially having a huge impact on the UK, but this was not reflected in coverage.

Especially, the analysis shows that the issue of possible withdrawal was not explored fairly or deeply enough. The possibility of withdrawal was central in both Ukip and Conservative EU policy. Coverage was heavily distorted, for instance by the substantial business news comment on the Today programme that withdrawal would damage British trade and jobs.

The message of potential damage to the economy was supplemented by the provision of frequent platforms for Labour and Liberal Democrat figures to warn of the same dangers. The spokesmen from these parties were not properly challenged on their views.

On the other hand, the only advocates of withdrawal who made points on that subject – apart from one brief sequence involving the Socialist Labour party and a minor mention by the former leader of the BNP – were from Ukip. But the main editorial focus on the party was whether they were competent or potentially racist and this clouded the treatment of withdrawal as an issue in itself.

In response to the Wilson report, the BBC promised to ensure that coverage of the EU was treated as important, and would include detailed explanation which ensured that audiences were fully abreast of the complex issues involved. But analysis by News-watch, based on the monitoring throughout the campaign of BBC **News at Ten**, Radio 4’s **Today**, and **World at One** and BBC2’s **Newsnight**, shows that this was not the case.

A major point here is that across the four programmes, coverage of EU-related election material amounted to only to 3.1% of the available programme airtime, a cumulative total of around 4 hours out of 130 hours of total programme time.

The key findings of this preliminary survey are:

Overall, there was only minimal editorial effort to explain to the audience what the respective party policies meant. This is best illustrated by the fact that Labour leader Ed Miliband was not interviewed at all about his EU-related election policies. When Mishal Husain (Today) and Evan Davis (Newsnight) interviewed Nigel Farage, no direct question were put to him about EU withdrawal or policy. David Cameron was interviewed by John Humphrys – but there were only four

brief questions about the EU, and this portion of the exchange lasted only four minutes. The only questions put to Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg were whether he agreed that holding a referendum in 2017 would be damaging to the British economy and whether he would join a coalition which supported the holding of a referendum.

The Conservative party's core policy was renegotiation of the relationship with the EU, followed by an in/out referendum. These bare facts were conveyed to audiences, but there was little of substance beyond that. David Cameron and George Osborne were asked a few questions which included whether uncertainty about the EU would lead to a loss of trade, and whether their policies were actually an attempt to placate anti-EU backbenchers. But there was no attempt to ask them to explain their decision to hold a referendum, or what the poll would mean for voters and the United Kingdom.

Labour policy on the EU was that there should be a more enthusiastic engagement, a referendum should be denied unless there was treaty change, and that the Conservative approach was a major risk to jobs and investment. Their basic stance to the EU was explored briefly, but there was no attempt to ask what such enthusiastic adherence to the EU actually entailed. More Labour figures than Conservatives appeared on EU themes, and a handful of adversarial questions – such as why the public should not be trusted to vote on EU membership and why Ed Miliband had not talked more about foreign policy – posed to them, but the interrogation was superficial and limited. Labour figures had frequent brief platforms from which to attack Conservative policies and were not challenged in their views.

The Liberal Democrats were asked only whether they agreed with holding a referendum in 2017, and later in the campaign, whether they would join a Conservative coalition which included a referendum promise. As with Labour, there were frequent soundbites from party spokesmen who attacked Conservative and Ukip policies towards the EU.

Most of the questioning of Ukip did not relate to the party's core policy of withdrawal from the EU, but was about their competence or attitudes towards race and immigration. Party spokesmen had the opportunity to make a handful of key points about the EU – such as that the UK could leave the EU and subsequently have a trading relationship with it. But editorial effort was minimal, and on the day of the launch of the Ukip manifesto, more focus was on telling audiences that Mr Farage had called the 2010 manifesto 'drivel' than conveying what was in the 2015 version.

A further major issue was business coverage. Throughout the campaign, there was a focus on interviewing business and political figures who believed that leaving the EU would be damaging to business in the UK. For instance, the Today programme interviewed only four guests who spoke in favour of the Conservative referendum policy, or who more broadly supported EU reform, and 18 speakers who saw the proposed referendum as a threat or a worry to business. There was not a single contribution from any speaker who believed that withdrawal from the EU would benefit British business. This frequent one-sided reporting amplified the suggestion that there was strong opposition to both the referendum and withdrawal. Put bluntly, it was an extra and sustained strand of bias against the policies of both the Conservative and Ukip parties, and against withdrawal as an issue in its own right.

INTRODUCTION

This latest News-watch report is based on analysis of all EU-related coverage broadcast on four of the BBC's highest profile news and current affairs programmes between March 31, the official start of the 2015 General Election campaign and May 10, three days after the poll. The programmes selected for analysis were: Today, World at One (both Radio 4), BBC1 News at Ten, and BBC2 Newsnight.

This analysis is based on all the items on these programmes which mentioned the EU, with a primary focus on election-specific EU content broadcast in the pre-election period March 31 – May 7.

It was incumbent on the BBC's most important flagship programmes, amounting to 5hr 15 minutes each weekday, to provide coverage of the EU that was reasonably balanced and which contained a wide range of subject matter and opinion in this key, keenly contested area of public policy.

EU Membership was a central concern of all the main parties. Ukip wanted to leave as soon as possible; Conservatives promised a yes/no referendum on membership after fundamental renegotiation of the UK's terms of membership. Both Labour and Liberal Democrats were opposed to a referendum of the sort proposed by David Cameron. Instead, while wanting limited reform, they primarily advocated closer engagement with the EU. They warned that closer co-operation was needed and that the Conservative/Ukip approach would lead to the loss of jobs, influence and trade.

Although there were divisions along party lines, the differences between pro-EU, euro-sceptic and withdrawalist positions were blurred and complex. For example, Labour cast David Cameron as 'anti-EU'. Yet he and his Chancellor George Osborne were enthusiastic supporters of both what they cast as 'renegotiation' and of staying in the EU. At the same time, both Labour and Liberal Democrats professed to want extensive reform of EU regulation. The only voice for unconditional withdrawal was that of Ukip.

In that heated context, it could reasonably be expected that the EU would figure prominently as a topic and that the difference between the parties would be aired and explored thoroughly.

The survey, based on full monitoring, timing and logging into a database of all these programmes, clearly shows that the BBC certainly had the capacity to mount structured, off-diary explorations of key subjects. For example, on April 10, a series of special Today reports was broadcast on the impact on Cambridgeshire of immigration, and Newsnight broadcast a similar investigation on April 22.

But in reality, coverage was very limited. For example, as the table below shows, Newsnight, which in the survey period broadcast 1,244 minutes of programming, carried only 29 minutes of EU-related material that was about the election.

Programme	EU-related Election Coverage	Available Airtime	Percentage
Today	1 hr 47 min	66 hours 30 min	2.7%
World at One/WTW	66m	29 hours 50 min	3.6%
News at Ten	43m	14 hours 40 min	4.9%
Newsnight	30m	20 hours 44 min	2.4%
TOTAL	4 hr 6 min	131 hours 44 min	3.1%

The limited nature of EU-related election material is illustrated by Newsnight's interview of Nigel Farage in an 'immigration special' by Evan Davis on April 22. Although the exchange itself was around 15 minutes long, it contained less than a minute of coverage relating directly to the EU. Indeed, a studio discussion on immigration in the same edition accounted for over half the EU material broadcast by Newsnight over the six weeks of the survey, and although included in News-watch's EU coverage totals as it had marginal relevance to the specific debate on EU migrants, its primary focus was not specifically on the EU at all. The reality is that Newsnight broadcast only about 15 minutes of material that was wholly and directly about EU-related issues in the election – about 1% of airtime.

Given the importance of the relationship of the UK to the EU as an election theme, this is hard to understand.

What follows is an analysis of the EU-election coverage focused on each of the main four political parties. The aim is to establish to what extent it can be regarded as properly informative, balanced and wide-ranging.

SECTION 1: ANALYSIS OF THE FOUR MAIN PARTIES

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

The Liberal Democrats election policy was strong and enthusiastic support for the EU, qualified by a desire for some reform and the promise of a referendum if there was major treaty change. It emerged during the course of the campaign that, because the Conservative party supported an in/out EU referendum, the Liberal Democrats would take part in another Conservative-led government only if they were granted 'major concessions' in return.

The Liberal Democrat EU-related appearances were:

March 30: Nick Clegg was interviewed on Today. Justin Webb noted that a Labour advertisement in the press that morning claimed that holding a referendum in 2017 would be very damaging to British business and asked if he agreed. Mr Clegg outlined that the Liberal Democrat position was that if there was a major transfer of powers to the EU, there should be a referendum. He did not yet know the exact circumstances of a referendum then if it was held, so he could not say what his exact stance towards it would be. He accused the Conservatives of moving to the right in planning to hold it, having suffered a 'rush of blood to the head' over the issue. Mr Webb tried hard to push Mr Clegg but he refused to shift his position further.

March 31: On World at One, Malcolm Bruce argued that 16-17 year olds should be allowed to vote in an EU referendum if it was held. He also suggested the Liberal Democrat approach of wanting to stay in the EU was good for David Cameron.

April 1: Vince Cable said in a News at Ten soundbite the Conservative government was veering off to the right by reopening the whole issue of British membership of the EU. This threatened jobs and investment 'on large scale'.

April 7: On Today, Conservative peer Lord Finkelstein noted that what the Liberal Democrat manifesto did not say about the EU was interesting. Paddy Ashdown's former press secretary, Miranda Green, said she particularly agreed with Danny Finkelstein on the EU referendum question, 'which will be a crucial sort of story behind the election'.

April 15: David Laws, speaking on Today to John Humphrys about the Liberal Democrat manifesto, said an in/out EU referendum was 'absolutely not the Liberal Democrat policy' and reiterated that it was their approach to allow a referendum only if there was major constitutional change. He said that to have 'some British-inspired referendum on a random timetable determined by the Conservative Party is not sensible.' John Humphrys asked if it was a 'red line'. David Laws said he wasn't going to pick out individual policies, because they did not yet know what the make-up of the next parliament was going to be. John Humphrys said that there was no way that David Cameron could renege on this promise as 'his party would explode'. He declined to discuss how this would affect potential negotiations with the Conservatives relating to a Coalition.

April 19: On World This Weekend, Vince Cable said the possibility of leaving the EU (and hence the referendum) would be very damaging. He suggested that there could be 'near paralysis' in Parliament. If the result of the referendum was close, that could generate 'chaotic' problems.

April 21: Paddy Ashdown said that there were major divisions in the Conservative party, and it was allied with 'Blue-kip' as well as being divided over the EU. Mr Ashdown also alleged that Ukip was a single issue party, an 'anti-immigrant party'. If it went into coalition with the Tories, there would be week-by-week anti-immigrant measures. He added that it would be folly to put the governing party under the influence of 'quite extreme parties who will keep making demands'.

April 22: David Laws was asked on Today whether, because of the referendum promise, the Liberal Democrats would join a coalition with the Conservatives again. He replied that there would have to be trade-offs.

April 24: At 6.33am, Norman Smith mentioned briefly that the Liberal Democrats had said that a Conservative government would give the markets the jitters because of fears about the EU referendum., At 8.44am, Liberal Democrat MP Danny Alexander – who, it was said, had mentioned a massive 'lurch to the right' if Conservatives won - was asked whether his party holding the balance of power would stop a referendum on the EU. He told Sarah Montague that the referendum idea was wrong, but did not rule out the possibility of a coalition even if that idea went ahead. On News at Ten, Danny Alexander said he thought HSBC was right to warn of the big dangers for the UK of the threat to leave the European Union.

April 28: at 8.49am, Norman Smith said that Nick Clegg had been asked whether the referendum on the EU was a 'red line' for the party but he had said it was not. On Newsnight, Tim Farron, the Liberal Democrat MP, said his party would not enter a coalition with a party (the SNP) that wanted to break up the UK. He alleged that if you wrapped yourself in a Saltire or the Union Jack (like Ukip), 'you were dangerous and divisive'. He would not want to work with a party that was seeking to destabilise the UK by taking it out of the EU.

May 1: On Today, Steve Webb, the Liberal Democrat pensions minister, said that his party would not 'just sign up' to a Conservative coalition because of the referendum pledge. The feature explored generally whether the Liberal Democrats would rule out a coalition with the Conservatives.

May 3: Ben Wright analysed on News at Ten what might happen over the EU if, as expected, no party won an overall majority. He pointed out that Nick Clegg had answered 'maybe' to the possibility of a referendum if there was a new Liberal Democrat coalition.

May 5: At 8.10am, Nick Clegg said that his party was pro-European 'but not frightened of the people'. He claimed the Conservatives had opted for a referendum as a tool to manage their party. Mr Clegg asserted that his party had not changed tack over a referendum, they still wanted one if new powers were given over to Brussels. John Humphrys suggested he had performed a U-turn over the stance towards a referendum. Mr Clegg denied again that this was the case, and claimed it was David Cameron who had U-turned. He added the referendum was not a red line in terms of a possible Coalition because they had chosen more important ones, such as investing in the NHS. On

The World at One, after an item from Sandwich in Kent (a town in the constituency where Nigel Farage was standing) former Liberal Democrat MP Sir Andrew Stunell said it was vital that the UK remained part of Europe. On News at Ten, Danny Alexander of the Liberal Democrats, referring to a prediction that the UK would have the fastest-growing economy in Europe, said that his party would keep the UK together and make sure the UK was leading in the EU.

Analysis

Exploration of the Liberal Democrat policies towards the EU was very limited. In his first long interview with Today, on March 30, the only question put to Mr Clegg was whether he would commit to opposing a referendum on the ground that it would be (as Labour had claimed that morning in a press ad) damaging to business. On May 5, he was asked briefly by John Humphrys, in a sequence lasting less than a minute, whether his party had changed tack over the referendum because they still wanted one if new powers were definitely handed over to Brussels. He told Mr Humphrys that his party was 'pro-European' 'but not frightened of the people'. On March 31, Sir Malcolm Bruce was asked why his party wanted 16 and 17 year olds, along with EU nationals resident in the UK, to be able to vote in an EU referendum if one was held. No other questions were put to party members about EU policy. The only interest was whether they would join a Coalition with the Conservatives if their policies still included an EU referendum. The answer was a qualified 'yes'. Norman Smith (Today April 24) said that the Liberal Democrats had claimed the Conservative government would give the markets the jitters because about fears of an EU referendum.

On at least eight occasions, party spokesmen made appearances in which they had the platform to attack the referendum. They called the eurosceptic approach (pursued by Conservatives and Ukip) variously a 'lurch to the right', 'dangerous and divisive', 'de-stabilising', pandering to Ukip 'the anti-immigrant party', paralysing (over the Parliamentary process), chaos-causing, and a massive threat to investment and jobs.

Overall, therefore, Liberal Democrats had clear space to mount vitriolic attacks on opponents to their EU policies, but they were not challenged about their views or asked at any stage to justify or explain their position. Put another way, there was no editorial attempt to interrogate the party's strongly pro-EU stance, despite their frequent insinuations that their opponent's policies were de-stabilising and potentially racist.

LABOUR

The Labour policy on the EU was strongly against an in/out referendum unless there was treaty change, to become more fully engaged in EU processes, to seek reforms on some elements of existing directives and regulation, and to warn voters that business was worried that the possibility of a UK exit – as proposed by the Conservatives and Ukip – would lead to serious negative effects on the UK economy, including loss of trade, influence and jobs.

Labour also said it wanted reform of some elements of immigration policy, and held a press conference to that effect during the campaign. But it also asserted strongly that Ukip's approach to immigration control was negative and verging on racism. It accused the Conservatives of not doing enough to stem abuses of the current EU immigration framework and also of causing the Mediterranean immigrant crisis because their policies had destabilised Libya.

This amounted to a strongly pro-EU agenda against a background that the previous year's European elections had indicated that in some key areas, support for Labour had diminished, at least partly because Ukip and the Conservatives were offering options to both change the relationship with the EU and adopt a tougher stance to the free movement of people/workers directive.

Despite this – that Labour remained strongly pro-EU despite clear pressures from the electorate (and also from within its own ranks) – there was no editorial effort to explore or interrogate the Labour approach towards the EU. No questions were put to Labour which challenged their pro-EU stance.

Interview of labour politicians about EU policies were;

March 30: Chuka Umunna was asked (on the day of Labour's business manifesto launch) if business was pro-Labour or anti-referendum. The context was Ed Miliband's claim that there was a clear and present danger to British interests because of the Conservative policy to hold a referendum. Very little was said or explored about Labour's actual EU-related policy. On World at One, Chris Lesley defended the Labour policy towards business and attacked the Conservative approach to an EU referendum on the ground that it would undermine investment and business confidence.

April 3: Caroline Flint, shadow energy spokesman, appeared with Michael Gove to discuss the leader's debate. It was noted that Nigel Farage 'had made points about the EU'. Ms Flint asked about the Labour approach to a coalition with SNP, countered by asking whether the Conservatives would rule out a coalition with Ukip and asserted that the interests of the country did not like with coming out of the EU.

April 6: Natasha Norwood, Labour candidate, Dudley South, was interviewed briefly. She defended Labour's use of companies' names in the Labour election campaign and said it had expressed concerns about the UK 'moving from Europe' and how that would impact on businesses.

April 7: Peter McFadden, former shadow Europe minister, discounted the idea – because it was completely different terrain – that Tony Blair's warning about the EU referendum should be discounted. He claimed that leaving the EU was not about trusting the people (as Mr Cameron claimed), but because he couldn't control his own backbenchers. It placed a huge question mark

over trade and jobs. Martha Kearney thus asked three adversarial questions – but did not raise further points against any of Mr McFadden’s answers.

April 7: Tony Blair was briefly questioned by Allegra Stratton on Newsnight about his speech. He denied that he had avoided talking about Ed Miliband and said he (Mr Miliband) had not made concessions on his pro-EU stance despite huge pressure to do so. Former Labour policy advisor and commentator Matthew Taylor said on Newsnight that David Cameron would not have promised a referendum on the EU if his leadership had been stronger. He noted how self-assured Tony Blair was.

April 20: Yvette Cooper was interviewed on World at One about the Mediterranean Migrant drownings and attacked the Conservatives for not pushing the EU into doing more to prevent them. It was said that more funding from the EU was vital.

April 24: With Ed Miliband warning that David Cameron was presiding over a massive decline in British influence, Douglas Alexander was interviewed on Today. James Naughtie observed that Mr Miliband had himself had little to say about foreign affairs during his time as Labour leader. Mr Alexander responded that the Conservative approach had weakened the UK influence in Brussels, and David Cameron – because of his referendum promise – had united Europe against him. He attacked as ‘fantasy’ the idea that less involvement in the EU would strengthen influence in Washington. Ed Miliband argued that while change in the EU was necessary, Britain’s future was in it. Mr Alexander alleged that Mr Cameron had spent more time negotiating with his own backbenchers than with the EU.

April 27: Peter McFadden was interviewed on Newsnight, but not asked anything about domestic EU policies – the focus was on the Mediterranean deaths and the need to work with the EU and UN over the problems involved.

April 29: Ed Balls, Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, said in a Today interview, ‘We need to get business investment, and we’ve got a government which is, as we hear from business leader after business leader, deterring investment in our economy, by putting the future of Britain in the European Union at risk.’ He mentioned the same point again later, briefly, saying that families and businesses were worried ‘about deep spending cuts, cuts to tax credits and Britain leaving the European Union in a reckless way’.

April 30: Yvette Cooper was the guest on World at One’s Election Call. The first question alleged that Labour’s immigration policy was not satisfactory because too many people were coming in to the UK. Ms Cooper did not answer directly but said there were perhaps big differences between her and the questioner because she did not want to pull out of the EU. The second caller wanted to know why there would be no EU referendum under Labour. Ms Cooper said there would be a referendum, but only if there was a big handover of power to Brussels, but the issue now was to stimulate the economy, and it would be damaging to pull out of the EU.

May 3: Chuka Umunna said in response to a question that if David Cameron was elected, there would be the same chaos, instability and uncertainty as under John Major in 1992 ‘when the Conservative party completely fell apart over the issue of Europe’.

May 5: Louise Baldock, the Labour candidate in Stockton on Tees, said in a brief response to Allegra Stratton that she was 'jealous' of the EU referendum promise because it went down well with voters, but she added that she saw why referendums could not be a regular part of politics.

These were further brief mentions of Labour policy towards the EU:

March 30: On the day of the launch of Labour's manifesto, it was said in Today bulletins they had pledged to stay in the EU. There were soundbites in all the main bulletins and programmes in which Ed Miliband warned that the EU referendum would lead to two years' of uncertainty and a drop in investment. A BBC correspondent suggested in a constituency report at 6.32am that Labour might do rather well in the North-east because Nissan shared their pro-EU outlook. On World at One, in a sequence which explored business community attitudes towards Labour's stance against the EU referendum, and also its overall business agenda, Labour party donor John Mills said he supported the holding of a referendum, though he also speculated that it would likely lead to a stay-in verdict.

In News at Ten, the featured business leaders said they agreed with Labour's pro-EU approach and thought it would benefit them. One of them objected to being used in Labour political advertising, but said nonetheless that he was pro-EU.

April 2: The Today newspaper review noted an FT item which suggested that despite Ed Miliband's efforts to court business, there was a more traditional fight going on between Labour and its boardroom critics.

April 4: In a constituency report from Loughborough, a vox pop contributor who was described as a previously Conservative voter said he would not vote for the party this time because of their policy on the referendum.

April 18: Today bulletins said that Labour had announced it was clamping down on employers who exploited migrant workers in moves that suggested it was trying to stop its supporters from defecting to Ukip. On News at Ten, Ed Miliband was quoted as saying Labour had got immigration policy wrong in the past, but would now enforce restrictions on unskilled labour coming into the UK, Reporter Ian Watson said that Mr Miliband could not control the numbers coming into the UK from the EU, but could from the rest of Europe. There was negative comment from Nigel Farage, and Mr Watson suggested that Mr Miliband had a long way to go before he won back voters' trust on this issue.

Analysis

In the survey period, there were only 13 exchanges (listed in the first part above) in which Labour figures were asked about, or expressed an opinion about, the party's policies towards Europe. Eleven senior figures from the party appeared. A notable exception was Ed Miliband.

A handful of adversarial questions were put to them – why should voters not be trusted with a referendum, why should Tony Blair be believed (because he had also advocated joining the euro), why was not Ed Miliband more active on 'foreign affairs', and why Labour had, in effect, hijacked pro-EU company names to bolster their pro-business image. In addition, an election line caller suggested to Yvette Cooper that the party's immigration policies should be re-named 'invasion policies' because they were not adequate, and a second suggested that too much sovereignty had

been handed over to Brussels. But those two areas, aside there was no editorial effort to challenge Labour's pro-EU approach.

Elements of Labour's approach were thus held briefly up to scrutiny, but none of the sequences amounted to tough questioning in the same way that, for example, Nigel Farage was quizzed by Mishal Husain or Evan Davis in other parts of the election coverage. It amounted only to gentle exploration of Labour's EU-related policies.

The list above also shows that (like the Liberal Democrats), although Labour EU policies were not examined closely, party spokesmen and women were afforded regular opportunities to plug their own EU-related policies while rubbishing those of their opponents.

This was in sharp contrast, for example, to Ukip. When party economic spokesman Patrick O'Flynn advocated that leaving the EU would save the UK billions of pounds, Martha Kearney stated bluntly that he was wrong – that figures from a think-tank indicated otherwise. Full details are below in the section on Ukip.

A further important point is that the party's pro-EU stance, together with its claims that the business community supported Labour policies, was amplified by Today's business coverage. This is explored further in the section below.

Almost absent from the coverage was mention that some Labour candidates supported withdrawal from the EU. The only very brief glimpse of that there were differences in opinion within the party over attitudes towards EU policy came on March 30, when party donor John Mills said he supported a referendum.

CONSERVATIVES

The EU referendum was a central plank of Conservative party policy in the General Election, to the extent that towards the end of the campaign David Cameron said it was a 'red line' promise that could not be compromised or diluted in any coalition arrangements. Associated with that, his pledge to first renegotiate the United Kingdom's relationship with the EU was also an important manifesto pledge designed to win back party supporters who were considering switching allegiance to Ukip.

Yet coverage of the both the referendum and renegotiation with party figures was extremely limited.

A few brief questions were put in two interviews with George Osborne, one with David Cameron, and one with party chairman Grant Shapps. In addition, on a World at One Election Call, William Hague was asked two questions on EU policy. All other mentions of the EU were incidental soundbites.

This was the list in full:

Interviews

March 30: Party chairman Grant Shapps contributed on World at One to a discussion about Labour's policy towards business. In answer to Martin Sorrell's claim that the EU referendum would sap business confidence, Mr Shapps denied this was the case. He was also interviewed with shadow trade minister Chris Leslie, and defended the decision to hold a referendum on the grounds that it was what people wanted. He attacked Labour's alleged anti-business approach.

April 7: George Osborne, interviewed by Shaun Ley, responded to Tony Blair's warning against an EU referendum. He said that the British people wanted a vote on EU membership and wanted to be part of the EU but not run by it. He denied investment would be hit by the referendum prospect. Mr Osborne alleged that Tony Blair wanted to be part of the 'United States of Europe', and noted he had wanted to join the euro.

April 23: On Today, John Humphrys asked the chancellor, George Osborne, for his reaction to claims by engineering company head Dr George Gillespie that holding the Euro referendum 'would put his company in trouble (because its business was with the EU) and the beliefs in China that the UK had already decided to leave the EU. George Osborne replied that since people had seen their policy on Europe, the UK had been attracting more Chinese investment than France, Germany and Italy put together. He added that he and David Cameron were fighting for a Europe that worked for business, not just here, but in other European countries, and were the only party offering, 'in Europe, but not run by Europe' to voters. (1.25 min on EU)

April 24: On the World at One's Election Call, a caller put it to William Hague that immigration could not be controlled unless the UK left the EU and asked what was being done to improve wages in eastern Europe so that people did not want to move here. Mr Hague first responded that he should have a vote on the matter of whether he wanted to stay in the EU. He claimed his party would negotiate a new deal on Europe 'including on immigration'. The caller said that EU money should be spent to make wages more equitable. Mr Hague said that David Cameron had also put forward the

idea in Europe that when new countries joined the EU, they would not have the right to live anywhere in the EU.

May 6: At 8.10am, John Humphrys suggested to David Cameron that he was taking a 'massive risk' over his EU policy. Mr Humphrys said he had only offered the referendum to please his own backbenchers and to 'shoot Ukip's fox'. Mr Cameron disagreed and said that treaty after treaty had been passed so it was time to give people a say. He claimed he would get powers back in the same way he had 'vetoed a treaty'. John Humphrys said that Jean-Claude Juncker had ruled out treaty change relating to free movement of people. Mr Cameron side-stepped the question and suggested that changes in the benefit payments system were needed. He suggested he was trusting the people and giving the first referendum since 1975. Mr Humphrys said the arguments would dominate the first 18 months of a Conservative government and would be extremely damaging. He added that the CEO of a high tech company had returned from China and told him that many there believed already that the UK was leaving the EU. Mr Cameron replied that the British Chambers of Commerce backed the referendum, and added he believed people wanted to see evidence of a strategy to sort out the relationship with the EU. Mr Humphrys asked if he would vote to leave the EU. Mr Cameron did not answer but said he had achieved real change and would do so again, over vetoing treaty change and getting the EU budget cut.

Other direct Conservative mentions and soundbites:

April 1: Business correspondent/editor Kamal Ahmad said on Today that Ed Miliband – reacting to a letter from 100 businesses supporting the Conservative economic policies – had said he believed businesses supported his commitment to remaining in the EU. On News at Ten, Kamal Ahmad said that Ed Balls, the shadow chancellor, had also claimed Labour's commitment to the EU was good for companies (this was buttressed by an equally pro-EU comment from Vince Cable).

April 2: On Newsnight, in an extract from the leaders' debate, David Cameron was asked by Nigel Farage whether he would discuss with EU leaders the free movement of people directive with the EU.

April 3: Conservative minister Michael Gove was asked whether a Conservative government would honour a vote in an EU referendum if the Scots and Welsh wanted to stay in. Mr Gove replied that it would be a national vote.

April 6: There were passing mentions on Today that the DUP supported the Conservative EU referendum. On World at One, Mike Wood, Conservative candidate for Dudley South stated that to rebuild trust he had been making as few promises on the doorstep as possible. He asserted: 'The only one that I've said is one that I know is completely in my hands in that I will vote for an EU referendum, I know that I can personally do that, regardless of anything else that happens within government, within the House of Commons'

April 7: In the Today bulletins, it was said that David Cameron had appealed for party voters to 'come home' from Ukip. Lord Finkelstein, a Conservative peer, said in a Today discussion that the most interesting thing about the Liberal Democrat manifesto was what it said about the Conservative EU referendum proposal. He did not elaborate further. On World at One, there was a soundbite from David Cameron, who said that Tony Blair was wrong about the EU referendum and

the British people deserved a say. On News at Ten, it was pointed out that David Cameron was opposing Tony Blair's warning that a referendum would affect the UK economy. Gavin Hewitt said that Mr Cameron's objective of renegotiation 'would not be easy' because many EU countries had said they opposed changes to the treaties or offering real concessions.

April 15: On Today, the Conservative candidate in South Thanet, Craig Mackinlay, said that the EU was low on the list of voter priorities.

April 26: Professor Tim Bale, from St Mary's College, London, said on The World This Weekend that Conservatives needed a more liberal attitude to immigration and 'a more internationalist attitude' towards the EU. In the election panel, Sam Coates from The Times said that the only foreign policy difference in the campaign was that Conservatives wanted a referendum on Europe and Labour did not.

May 1: Today bulletins reported that in the Question Time leaders' debate on BBC1 the previous evening, David Cameron had said his policy on the EU referendum was a red line issue. Gavin Hewitt repeated on News at Ten that David Cameron had a red line relating to the EU referendum in terms of coalitions with other parties.

May 5: The World at One bulletin said that Iain Duncan Smith had claimed that a vote for Ukip was 'a suicide note'.

May 6: On Newsnight, Matthew D'Ancona of the Times said that David Cameron had started out on the centre ground but was now losing support to the right. The rise of Ukip had led him in 2013 to take the greatest gamble of his political career, to hold a referendum on EU membership. Some said that this was a revelation of his true political identity as leader of the 'nasty party'.

Analysis

Overall, the editorial approach to the Conservative election campaign seemed to echo the words of South Thanet candidate Craig Mackinlay (above), that the EU was not high on the list of priorities.

In the longest of the four interview sequences about EU policy, totalling only four minutes, David Cameron was asked by John Humphrys whether his pledge over a referendum was merely to please his backbenchers and to 'shoot Ukip's fox'; whether the holding of a referendum would damage business confidence; whether there was any real chance of obtaining significant changes in the relationship with EU when Jean-Claude Juncker had ruled out treaty change; and whether he personally would vote to leave the EU.

George Osborne was asked whether the referendum policy would damage business confidence, and Grant Shapps the same question. Callers to William Hague suggested that the only way that immigration could be controlled was if the UK left the EU and also if there was a need for more equitable wages across Europe to stem the tide of immigration to the UK.

Outside the interviews, other Conservative appearances fleshed out briefly elements of party policy, for example that the in/out referendum was a red line issue or that the referendum promise was playing well on the canvassing doorstep.

In summary, Conservative politicians were asked only eight questions about their core EU policies during the entire campaign. The survey coverage failed to illuminate beyond the headline level what was behind the Conservative desire to change the relationship with the EU, and audiences were left mainly in the dark.

UKIP

Ukip's policy towards the EU was support for withdrawal by the United Kingdom, and that it wanted an in/out referendum to that end as soon as possible.

Linked to that, Ukip was also strongly opposed to the EU's directive on the free movement of citizens, on the ground that it made control of immigration from the EU impossible.

In this section, the listings include only mentions of the party where the EU is specifically mentioned or discussed issues relating to the party's overall conduct or competence have been stripped out. For example, on May 5, the peg for the interview of Mark Reckless – why Ukip had allegedly fielded disproportionate number of candidates with racist or otherwise unacceptable views – is not covered here, as it did not relate specifically to the party's EU policy.

That said, the bulk of coverage of Ukip related to its domestic policies, its conduct as a party, and its attitudes towards race and multiculturalism.

This created specific problems related to balance and fairness.

Ukip was the only main party that supported withdrawal, and (with one exception, a very brief contribution from the Socialist Labour Party) the topic was only explored through spokesmen from the party.

This meant that questions about whether Ukip itself was potentially racist or incompetent (which were frequently posed) inevitably were clouded by those questions. It boiled down to the creation editorially of a clear link between withdrawal and party conduct/potential racism. This was compounded by that in discussions with figures from other parties (as is demonstrated in the previous sections), there was no attempt to explore why they wanted to stay in, and no corresponding effort by presenters to interrogate supporters of staying in about their reasoning.

Despite obvious pressures on running order apace, all the programmes had the editorial capacity to go off-diary and be flexible, creative and proactive in elements of coverage. This happened (for example) with immigration on Today and Newsnight, In Katya Adler, interview with Jean-Claude Juncker, and in the business panel on World at One.

But no editorial effort was made to explain withdrawal or the costs of EU exit.

Thus overall, audiences to these BBC programmes saw 'withdrawal' as a topic only through a highly-distorted lens.

The full list of Ukip/EU mentions is:

March 30: Nigel Farage, commenting on the Labour business strategy and its warnings about the negative impact of a referendum, said that his party wanted a trading relationship with the EU but not membership.

March 31: Patrick O'Flynn took part in a feature (with Liberal Democrat Sir Malcolm Bruce) about whether EU nationals and 16-17 year olds should be allowed to vote in EU referendum. Mr O'Flynn argued that a Ukip presence was required in Parliament to make sure that the voting process was

kept honest. He said the British people should have the chance to vote on how they were governed, but not under 18s because the enfranchisement age was 18.

April 2: Nigel Farage was interviewed by Mishal Husain on Today, but there were no questions about the EU. News at Ten noted that Nigel Farage had said in the leaders' debate that Ukip was the only party supporting withdrawal from the EU. Newsnight also had clips from the leaders' debate. Nigel Farage claimed that 'nothing, nothing, nothing' could be done about the EU's free movement directive.

April 8: Members of a World at One business panel, two of whom were clearly firmly pro-EU asked Nigel Farage if the withdrawal policy would damage the UK's exports to the EU. One of the panellists claimed that many in the EU did not any more have confidence in the UK because of uncertainty about EU membership. Mr Farage said the EU was a political union and it was perfectly possible to have instead a free trade agreement. He added that EU energy policy was strangling British industry. The third panellist said she was considering voting Ukip but said her friends would call her racist if she did.

April 9: In a World at One report about the Ukip campaign, Alex Forsyth noted its focus on the EU and immigration. She said the campaign was faltering but discussed nothing about the EU.

April 10: Today carried a special series of reports about immigration in Cambridgeshire, with incidental mentions of the EU. Mishal Husain spoke to a local farmer who said immigrants were vital to his productivity. If Britain left the EU, his business would fold. Stuart Agnew, Ukip MEP for the area, denied that talking about immigration control was 'evil or wicked' He said the farmers would not have problems if the UK withdrew from the EU, because there would be a category for unskilled workers to help with farm labour.

April 15 (Ukip manifesto launch): It was said that the manifesto carried a promise to exit the EU. On Today, party spokesman Suzanne Evans noted that Jean-Claude Juncker had said the EU treaties could not be changed. On World at One, Patrick O'Flynn claimed that leaving the EU would save the UK £100bn. Martha Kearney said this was not supported by data from the Centre of Economic Research. Mr O'Flynn said there was a real need for a debate in that area, and that the issues would be brought into focus by the EU referendum. He observed that it would be 'very odd' for the BBC to take a position that leaving the EU would be damaging. Ms Kearney said he could not be certain that leaving would be beneficial. News at Ten also mentioned the Ukip pledge to leave the EU. James Landale noted that the party was on the back foot in polls, then included brief sequences from the press conference in which Nigel Farage said he wanted his country back and to control borders. Mr Landale asked Mr Farage one question tangentially about the EU. He suggested that if Britain voted not to leave, his manifesto pledges (dependent on financial savings) would not add up. Mr Farage replied that spending would be cut accordingly. On Newsnight, it was said that Ukip was promising to 'splash the cash' because of leaving the EU. Laura Kuenssberg put it to Nigel Farage that the manifesto was only aspirational because it depended on leaving the EU. Mr Farage said he hoped Britain would become self-governing and not give so much money away. Ms Kuenssberg suggested that leaving the EU would actually 'cost billions', in a sequence which lasted just over a minute.

April 17: Ukip MEP David Coburn, interviewed about the televised challengers' debate, said the EU had caused problems in the Ukraine.

April 18: A soundbite from Nigel Farage on News at Ten said there had been an open door immigration policy from ten EU members which were former communist states.

April 21: Martha Kearney asked Patrick O'Flynn if the UK would lose influence if it left the EU. Mr O'Flynn said that Britain was linked separately to lots of international bodies and that the EU had a disastrous record of foreign relations, for example in the Ukraine, where a signal had been sent out that a future in the EU was possible 'with no capability to enforce that'. Ms Kearney interrupted to suggest this was a case for a stronger EU. Mr O'Flynn replied that it was an argument focusing on likely outcomes rather than 'student politics high ground'. Ms Kearney suggested the US was also very keen for the UK to remain in the EU. President Obama had said it was hard to imagine the project going well without the UK. Mr O'Flynn said the President was talking about someone else's country and 'someone else's decision'. Ms Kearney said he was an important figure. Mr O'Flynn agreed he was, but said it was NATO that had kept the peace.

April 22: Evan Davis interviewed Nigel Farage on Newsnight but asked no questions about the EU, instead focusing on exploring his attitudes towards multiculturalism.

April 27: A constituency report from Camborne (Cornwall) – said to be the seat of Conservative George Eustice held with a majority of 66 votes – contained comment from Ukip candidate Bob Smith. Reporter Zoe Conway put it to him that EU money was keeping Cornwall afloat. Mr Smith said that the truth was it was British money paid to the EU and then sent back. The EU segment lasted only a minute.

April 28: In World at One, there was an item from Grimsby in which a supporter of Ukip – who had previously voted Labour – asked whether Ed Miliband would be the first Jewish prime minister since Benjamin Disraeli, and then asserted that although he was not personally anti-Jewish, there were many in the UK who were. In a later discussion of this, the broadcaster Richard Stilgoe suggested that if Ukip immigration policies applied, there would be no one to staff the NHS. Martha Kearney said their idea was that more people should come from the Commonwealth rather than the EU. Mr Stilgoe said that 'people from all over the world' staffed the NHS.

April 30: On News at Ten, Alex Forsyth noted that in the seaside towns where Nigel Farage was standing, there were pockets of deprivation, and their proximity to Europe meant that immigration was often blamed, 'making this fertile ground for Ukip'.

May 1: Today bulletins said that Nigel Farage had told the Question Time audience that a vote to stay in the EU would not mean that Ukip would be redundant. Nigel Farage was interviewed by John Humphrys, who suggested that the only way of getting an EU referendum was to vote Conservative. Mr Farage responded that David Cameron had spent most of 2010 and 2011 explaining why a referendum was not necessary, so it was vital to return as many Ukip MPs as possible so that his feet could be held to the fire on the subject. Later in the interview, Mr Humphrys asked if Mr Farage would join a Conservative Coalition. He said he would only do so if he was guaranteed a referendum. On News at 10, there was a soundbite from Mr Farage repeated that he would only join a coalition if there was a referendum commitment.

May 4: Nigel Farage fielded Election Call questions on World at One. The first caller noted Mr Farage had only been present on 2991 of 6961 votes at the European Parliament, which amounted to

'absenteeism'. Mr Farage said he had other responsibilities and his record was better than that of Nick Clegg when he had been an MEP. The caller said he was not satisfied with the answer and asked what Mr Farage had achieved as an MEP. He replied that he had lifted the veil of secrecy in the way the EU operated and had helped educate the outside world on the topic. The fifth caller asked if Ukip had analysed the cost of leaving the EU. The caller explained that she believed many more jobs would be lost as a result of leaving than would be created by barring immigrants. Mr Farage explained that trade with the EU would not stop if we left the EU. He said the influx from Eastern Europe had driven wages down in the UK. The caller alleged that he had not answered the question. Mr Farage said he wanted Britain to trade with both the EU and the rest of the world, and his party had done huge cost analysis and leaving the EU would be beneficial. The caller wanted to know how many jobs would be lost and how many gained. Martha Kearney then suggested that Mr Farage wanted a referendum by the end of the year, but that the Institute of Directors did not believe this was possible. Mr Farage responded that the referendum was a tactic devised by David Cameron and he was delaying as much as possible.

On May 5: Mark Reckless, the Ukip candidate, interviewed by Laura Kuenssberg on Newsnight, said that his party would work with a coalition if there was definitely a referendum and the vote was not given to under 18s.

May 6: Ukip spokesman Paul Nuttall was asked if Ukip would join a Conservative coalition. He responded that there would have to be a commitment to an EU referendum with spending pegged for both sides so that it would be conducted fairly. He added the poll should be held as soon as possible to avoid money being wasted on EU membership. Ms Montague asked if he would be happy to see a Conservative government fail if it did not deliver an early referendum 'because the alternative would be no referendum'. Mr Nuttall replied that Ukip would not support delay, and Ms Montague asked again if he would be prepared to see a Conservative government fail, then what damage Ukip could do to a Conservative government. Mr Nuttall replied that Ukip was not thinking of any deals and was concentrating on doing as well as possible in the vote. He noted that Iain Duncan Smith had said that a vote for Ukip was a suicide note for Britain. Ukip was not damaging the Conservative party – it had done that on its own over the past 10 years

On News at 10, James Landale, after analysing the Ukip election campaign, observed that the following day's vote would 'potentially determine the future of the United Kingdom and its membership of the European Union.'

Analysis

Distilled own, points that Ukip had the opportunity very briefly to make about their EU policy added up to the following:

- The UK could leave the EU and have a trading relationship with it
- Ukip wanted the referendum to be fairly held
- The UK could save billions by exiting the EU
- The EU immigration policy would allow some unskilled labour to assist with farming
- Ukip wanted tighter control of the UK borders
- Ukip would not join a coalition without a firm commitment to a referendum

This was an election where the EU was centre stage. Clearly, because this was a national election, it was important to explore Ukip's approach to domestic policies. But it was equally vital to examine the withdrawal issue because this was fundamental to the outlook and policies of the party – the reason it said it could afford investment in domestic infrastructure – and a major point of difference with all the other major parties.

The list above shows that there were only three occasions on these flagship BBC programmes, when figures from Ukip were asked what withdrawal would actually mean to the UK in terms of costs and benefits.

On each occasion they were met with brick-wall statements from BBC presenters who stated that think-tanks or experts believed they were wrong. There was no opportunity for Ukip to challenge these blanket statements.

On top of this, Ukip figures had no opportunity to expound their case properly because each exchange took only a few minutes

The longer political leader interviews that were held with Nigel Farage were overwhelmingly aimed at testing whether the party was racist and embraced multiculturalism. Clearly, Mr Farage was allowed the chance to defend himself against the line of questioning. But the exploration was from a very narrow perspective. Arguably the main question put to the leader of a political party which commanded almost 4m votes (by Evan Davis on April 22) was not about his core policy of withdrawal, but whether he supported the type of multiculturalism displayed in the Paddington Bear film. This amounted to a display of bizarre editorial priorities.

Treatment of withdrawal-related policies on the day of the Ukip manifesto launch was also extremely limited. Correspondents were more intent on saying that Nigel Farage had said the 2010 manifesto was 'drivel' than explaining to the audience key elements of policy. Of course, this was a news point, but not to the extent of such swamping.

Overall the four programmes failed to afford the withdrawal case sufficient time or status.

The axis of the inquiry about the party – and of the withdrawal perspective – was not whether the case for coming out of the EU was tenable, but rather whether Ukip's attitude towards immigration was wholesome, and its conduct as a party was proper.

Today and other programmes had the opportunity to be creative and proactive in EU coverage. This happened, for example, as has already been noted, with immigration on Today and the business panel on World at One. But no effort was made to explain withdrawal or the costs of EU exit.

This negativity towards the withdrawal case was amplified hugely on Today by that powerful figures and bodies who supported EU membership such as the CBI or Sir Martin Sorrell were afforded frequent platforms to expound their views without challenge

This added up to a deliberate agenda to discredit and diminish the withdrawal case.

SECTION 2: TODAY'S BUSINESS COVERAGE OF THE PROPOSED IN/OUT REFERENDUM

During Lord Hall and James Hardings's March 2015 appearance before the European Scrutiny Committee, Chair Bill Cash noted that he perceived a pattern within the Today programme's business coverage.

With respect to what goes on early in the morning, some of us get up quite early, and you will be glad to know that some of us are listeners to the "Today" programme and everything that starts at 6 o'clock in the morning. Some of us know a little bit about what goes on in the European context, and we find it rather difficult to listen to a stream of people who are constantly being asked, "But isn't this going to mean that if the United Kingdom was to leave the European Union, you"—for example, the vice-president of Ford—"would regard it as a complete disaster area for the United Kingdom?" Or, for example, someone such as Martin Sorrell is brought on, who is well known to have views of the kind that he tends to express very volubly. There is a clear indication to those of us who listen to it that there is some kind of a system and/or an accident that leads to those sort of people being asked on, whereas people who have a completely contrary view seem to get less of a bite of the cherry—can we put it that way round?

News-watch has observed a similar pattern over its recent Today surveys, and noted that on numerous occasions business guests who had been brought onto the programme to speak about an unrelated matter were subsequently specifically asked for their thoughts on an in/out referendum. During the 2015 General Election Survey, News-watch focused on this issue carefully, and noted the following points on which discussion of the EU referendum was brought up in the dedicated business slots.

News-watch recorded 18 separate occasions on which the in/out referendum was mentioned as part of Today's dedicated business coverage, between 31 March and 10 May 2010. They were:

John Cridland, director-general CBI: Simon Jack asked Mr Cridland whether business wanted an EU referendum. He replied that business considered that a referendum was a matter for the government and for the public, but the CBI wanted was more focused on achieving reforms across Europe. Simon Jack asked if change could be secured without the threat of a referendum. John Cridland said he believed that the way forward was to approach European allies in the business community and make the case for reform. He said he was optimistic that there was a positive case for reform in Europe, with 'Europe doing more of what it did well, like free trade deals, and less of what it did badly, like getting into the micro details of employment regulation.

Mike Hawes, Society of Motor Manufacturers: He thought that 90% of his members believed it was right for the UK to remain 'in Europe'

Ewen Cameron Watt, of Black Rock: He said his company had put out an election briefing in which they isolated two 'disruptive market scenarios'. The first was a Conservative-led coalition, which would lead to an EU exit referendum.

Norman Pickavance, donor to the Labour party: He said the requirement to work in open markets was part of a much broader strategy which was creating the right environment for business to grow. He asserted that 'being part of Europe' was clearly an essential component of that agenda.

Katja Hall, spokeswoman for the CBI: Echoing her director-general, she said that the question of a referendum was for politicians, but asserted that business opinion was really clear in believing that the UK staying in a reformed European Union was vital in the process of generating investment.

Helen Dickinson, director general of the British Retail Consortium: She was asked whether the upcoming election or 'fears about Europe' or 'any political things' were having any impact on consumer behaviour. She responded with points about consumer confidence, but did not mention anything specifically to do with the EU.

Stephen Ibotson, Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales: He said his organisation was cautious about the future 'and the uncertainty of the election and particularly the situation in Europe'

John Longworth, British Chambers of Commerce: He said that the majority of members of his network wanted a referendum because- while they would probably vote to stay in the European Union – they were concerned about 'things that are developing' in the eurozone, and the 'single market unravelling'. He added that these things needed fixing, and that having a referendum, as well as behind the Prime Minister in those negotiations, was important

Laith Khalaf a Senior Analyst at Hargreaves Lansdown: In a report looking at the idea that 'business hates uncertainty'. Simon Jack noted that there could be an EU referendum after the election. He asked Laith Khalaf what markets would make of that. Mr Khalaf replied: 'Yeah, again, added uncertainty'.

In the same report, there was an interview with **David Tinsley**, a pan-European economist, who said that there were elements outside the politicians' control, including fiscal policy, tax policy, 'and, importantly at this election, whether or not there is a referendum on membership of the EU, which is probably one of the most important questions facing the UK in 30 years.' He added: 'Well, we're a long way from exit from the EU, this is, in a sense, a road with a couple of years to travel'

In the same report, **Ian Stewart**, chief economist at Deloitte, was asked about the referendum. He replied his company was concerned about a referendum on EU membership and were worried about the possibility of adverse change in areas like regulation.'

John Holland-Kaye – chief executive of Heathrow Airport: Simon Jack raised the possibility of a Conservative victory in the election and asked what difference their promise of an EU referendum would make to Heathrow's operations. Mr Holland-Kaye said the impact on day-to-day operations would be small. He added that the airport would still be busy, but asked that some of the benefits of being part of the EU should not be overlooked. He claimed that many of the (advantageously) competitive rates from low-cost carriers came from the 'open market', and needed to be taken into account.

Finbar Dowling, project director of an engineering scheme at Hull docks: Simon Jack asked Mr Dowling whether the possibility of an EU referendum was affecting operations. He said the

uncertainty around that had been factored in. He was more concerned about the impact of climate change on investment.

Martin Gilbert, of Aberdeen Asset Management: Simon Jack asked, "...there's one potential outcome we could be looking at a European referendum, of the UK's place in Europe, is that a different order of disruption?" Mr Gilbert replied: "Yeah, I think for financial services, Europe is a big market for us and tending towards a single market. So any referendum of Europe is going to lead to uncertainty. Again, the markets don't really like uncertainty, but I think what it's telling you is that they think that's probably an unlikely outcome at the moment."

Cato Stonex, of THS Partners. Simon Jack put it to Mr Stonex that Martin Sorrell of WPP had said there was a 'Hobson's Choice' for business and finance, 'vote for higher top rate taxes and more intervening in the markets – that's Labour; or vote Conservative and possibly leave the EU – either one is anti-business. Mr Stonex agreed and said he thought the latter was more damaging in the long run, but in the short run individual investors might be more upset by a Labour-led minority government.

Simon Collins, of KPMG: Simon Jack asked if the 'Europe question' was a cause for concern. Mr Collins replied: 'Yeah, it is a cause for concern, for two things, I mean, I think business leaders clearly have a preference for staying in Europe and a certainty around that. So you've got two things, you've got uncertainty generally, which they don't like and then leading potentially to an exit which they really don't like, and they're worried about investor sentiment which I think is actually very different from the market sentiment, I mean, business leaders are more spooked by this stuff than the markets reflect.'

Brenda Kelly of London Capital Group: In the same interview sequence, Ms Kelly asserted that the 'prospect of an EU referendum in 2017 could very well unhinge the pound.'

David Tinsley, economist: On the news that the Conservatives were heading for an outright Commons majority, Mr Tinsley said, 'but for now I think the market is going to treat the result in a kind of market-friendly way, it's going to greet it with a sigh of relief, but the EU vote is definitely a risk thereafter.'

Of the **18 speakers** who contributed to the dedicated business slots, two of the speakers (Helen Dickinson, and David Tinsley in his first appearance) were 'neutral' in that either they didn't regard the referendum as a 'problem', or simply didn't answer the question put to them in terms which indicated a clear opinion. Two speakers from the CBI saw the referendum decision as a matter for government, but indicated that they were pro-EU and supported continued British membership, albeit with reforms. The remaining **14 speakers** saw the in/out referendum as a worry or a threat.

Not a single one of the guests was pro-withdrawal.

The only element within the business coverage that challenged this prevailing perspective appeared on the first day of monitoring. In the sequence featuring John Cridland of the CBI, Simon Jack mentioned as a brief aside that Business for Britain had commissioned from YouGov a poll about business opinion towards the EU. It had found that 1,000 small, medium and large firms backed a referendum by 66% to 26%. Mr Jack pointed out that this seemed to be counter to the assumption

that business did not want a referendum. However, he did not explore this subject further, and during the subsequent weeks of coverage no attempt was made to reflect the poll's findings in terms of the guests invited to contribute.

In addition, there were other interview sequences outside the confines of the dedicated Business News sections, in which the theme of the in/out referendum and its impact on business was explored in very similar terms in interviews with **8 speakers**. These were as follows:

Chuka Umunna, shadow business secretary: He was clearly anti-referendum and appeared on the programme to speak about Labour's full page advert in the FT attempting to woo business leaders over the threat of an in/out referendum and British exit.

'Mike' a vox pop contribution: He said he usually voted Conservative, but did not want a referendum. He wanted Britain to stay in the EU.

Dr George Gillespie, MIRA engineering company, interviewed by John Humphrys. Mr Gillespie said another major election issue for him would be 'Europe'. One of the reasons was that a part of his company's success was that it had become 'a landing strip for Europe'. He asserted that if the UK cut itself off from Europe, the whole reason for coming to the UK started to disappear. It made it much more difficult to attract foreign investment into the UK. He added that in conducting business around the world, he had had to explain that the UK was not 'leaving Europe' right, now. He contended that the renegotiation and referendum discussions were having ripple effects around the world. His message for the chancellor would be 'that we don't accidentally end up destroying one of our key industrial allies, which is to be part of Europe'

George Osborne, Chancellor – John Humphrys pointed out that Dr Gillespie had said, in his interview earlier in the same programme, that he believed his company would be in trouble because of the 'Euro referendum', and had given an example of concern, that of a senior businessman in China who was worried about the prospect of the UK leaving the EU. Mr Osborne replied that since his party had outlined its detailed policies about the EU, the UK has been attracting more Chinese investment into the UK than France, Germany and Italy put together. He added that he and David Cameron were fighting for a Europe that worked for business, not just here, but in other European countries. He claimed that Conservatives were the only party offering the possibility of being 'in Europe, but not run by Europe' at the election.

Baroness Patience Wheatcroft, Conservative peer: In reaction to the news that HSBC may be moving its headquarters from London, she said she thought the Conservative policy of delivering an EU referendum would generate certainty on the attitude towards the EU. Baroness Wheatcroft added that she had no doubt that the UK would stay in the EU and in consequence, doubts about membership would then be disposed.

Martin Wolf, chief economics commentator at the FT, interviewed jointly with Baroness Wheatcroft, said the argument about the EU was 'ludicrous', because if the UK were to leave the EU, locating their headquarters in Hong Kong would not help HSBC. He claimed that some of the points put forward were completely incomprehensible.

Guy Grainger, chief exec of UK operations at Jones Lang LaSalle: (Saturday edition, so no dedicated business news section in the programme, interviewed by John Humphrys) Mr Grainger said: "an EU

referendum for business would be very unsettling and the outcome is pretty uncertain, as we've seen, there's quite a swing from the public opinion about [the] EU, which is coming from a very different place from business opinion".

There was an additional a sequence in which Sarah Montague talked to **Tom Heap** of BBC Radio 4's File on 4 about farming issues. Although not counted directly as a contributor according to News-watch's long-term methodology (given that he was in effect operating as a BBC correspondent), he asserted that UK farming was connected like no other industry to the EU because of the Common Agricultural Policy. He added that issues surrounding a referendum or any 'decision to leave Europe' would have a seismic effect on farming. He added that, although not all farmers were pro-EU, many worried about the holding of a referendum and the prospect of leaving.

Of these eight guests, two – Finbar Dowling and Martin Wolf – gave a neutral responses. George Osborne and Baroness Wheatcroft both supported a referendum, but from the perspective of being in favour of continued British membership within a reformed EU. The remaining four speakers saw the referendum as a danger, a worry or a threat. **Once again, there was not a single contribution from anyone who believed that leaving the EU would benefit British business.**

The overriding narrative in these responses was that 'business doesn't like uncertainty', and that an in/out referendum would be a cause of uncertainty – ergo the referendum would be bad for business and bad for Britain. When the figures are amalgamated, **every speaker who offered a clear political viewpoint was either anti-referendum, or pro-referendum but pro-EU.**

Within academic media theory, there is an argument that media influence on audiences is not clearly apparent, but occurs by virtue of a long and steady build-up over a significant period of time. This process is sometimes referred to as the 'drip, drip, drip effect'. This analysis of Today's business coverage during the election period (and preceding it) appears to show the building of a very specific news narrative, and specifically that the EU in/out referendum and withdrawal would be detrimental to British business. The survey commissioned by Business for Britain that suggested the opposite view was, by sharp contrast, covered only minimally.

The future of the UK's position in the EU was clearly a matter which divided the political parties. It seems extraordinary that in a general election period, there was such imbalance in the treatment of the issues involved. Many business leaders do want significant change in the relationship with the EU. Today made very little effort to speak to them, but did to their opponents.

This business coverage must be considered an integral and important sub-component of overall election coverage. Its impact was to amplify the message that there was strong opposition to leaving the EU. This could have been reduced if there had been corresponding robust interrogation an exploration of the issues involved with politicians from all sides of the in/out debate. But the analysis above shows conclusively that there was not.