

INTRODUCTION: The survey of Today, from September 14- December 12, 2009, spanned the second Irish referendum and the subsequent final moves towards the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, its passage into law, and speculation and confirmation about who would become EU President and High Representative. Coverage of these events amounted to around 53% of Today’s EU-related output, which equated to 2.7% of the programme content. This was considerably less than that devoted to other major stories such as climate change and Afghanistan.

Within this framework, the main focus of Today features was the difficulties caused to the Conservatives by the ratification, their dropping of a commitment to hold a referendum, and the allegations that their new alliances in Europe were with extremist parties. Tory difficulties became *the* central issue of the ratification in editorial terms; no other aspect was analysed in such depth. There were at least 16 instances when Conservative party EU-related policy problems were the main focus of analysis or coverage.

UKIP figured very little; its total contribution was only 4.5% of that devoted to EU affairs, or 1,624 words expressed by eight party speakers. But the figures inflate their actual presence, because most of their contributions were tangential or on matters of relatively minor importance. The telling statistic is that there were only two interviews of UKIP figures in the survey period. Neither was about Lisbon and its aftermath, and only one touched fleetingly on party policy. It would be reasonably expected that a party that commanded 16.5% of a national vote would have been better represented within coverage of issues central to its existence.

There was very little effort to explore the government’s (or the Liberal Democrats’) approach to the treaty. It would be expected that, for the sake of balancing the focus on the Conservatives (and ‘euroscepticism’ insofar as the Conservatives reflected it), there would be. Yet the only relevant questioning of a senior Labour government figure was in one interview with David Miliband. He was asked only about his reasons for supporting Mr Blair as EU President, and why he thought the Tories were apparently allied with extremist groups within the European parliament. The interrogation gave Mr Miliband a platform to explain why he thought the Lisbon Treaty strengthened EU democracy, and to attack the Conservatives. The bias was made worse because at crucial junctions in the development of the story - for example the confirmation of the Irish ‘no’ vote, or the appointment of Lady Ashton as High Representative - the only opinion sought in reaction was that of Europhiles.

Thus, the main aim of EU-related coverage seemed to be to show that the passage into law of the treaty would have serious negative ramifications in the Conservative/eurosceptic camp, and possibly open up a new “civil war” over the EU. There was very little corresponding effort to explore what the Lisbon Treaty meant to the UK, and why Labour had sanctioned it despite this being against public opinion.

UKIP: The previous Newswatch survey of the BBC’s EU coverage found that during the European parliamentary elections in 2009, there was a disproportionate and highly negative skewed focus on UKIP’s record relating to the claiming of MEP allowances, and very little effort to explore party policy.

In this survey as a whole, UKIP was almost airbrushed out of the picture, despite the recent electoral success which saw its vote rise to 40% of the poll in some areas of the country and 16.5% overall. Its total contributions on EU-related matters amounted to only 1624 words, of which less than a third were directly about EU policy - a little over three minutes. This was period of important EU-related developments, and it would be expected that the party that attracted second place in a national poll a few months earlier would be brought into coverage of these events on a regular basis and at a level commensurate with its vote. It was not. The 1624 words were only 4.5% of the total coverage of the EU in the period. Appearances by the party were limited to eight, of which only two could be regarded as interviews. The remainder were brief contributions.

The main interview with a senior UKIP figure was with Lord Pearson of Rannoch following his election as party leader. There was an associated bulletin item. The focus of this coverage was whether there had been a pact with the Conservatives that UKIP would disband if a referendum on withdrawal from the EU was held. It was then suggested that the approach had been clumsy and amateurish, as well as autocratic. Lord Pearson was asked only one question about party policy, whether they would target the Conservatives, and whether this would allow the Liberal Democrats as power brokers. Lord Pearson replied:

No, if we can achieve a hung parliament, we start to achieve a realignment in British politics. And that realignment has, at its heart, leaving the European Union. Because we can’t do any of the things we want to do, about immigration and many other policies, if we stay in the European Union. And therefore, if we can force a hung parliament, we gum up the system nicely, and the idea that the British people want the smack of firm government from Westminster is surely a bit of a sick joke now. They don’t. The British people are fed up with all this regulation and endless laws from Brussels and Westminster. Don’t forget, most of our national law is now made in Brussels in a secret process.

JW: Well, that’s disputed isn’t it, actually?

LP: No, it’s not disputed actually.

JW: They have an input into our national laws but they don’t make most of them.

LP: Listen, the German government says 84% of our national law. I mean, we’re happy to go along with 70%. I’m simply saying the majority of our national law. And just look, look what’s about to happen to the City of London. Look at Monsieur Barnier being appointed to this job. We’re going to have a Common Financial Policy now, which is going to be a worthy companion to the Common Agricultural and Fisheries Policy.

JW: (*speaking over*) Alright, and all of this you will be putting to the electors . . . Lord Pearson.

These were the only words from UKIP in the entire monitoring period that dealt with core party policy. The interview ran to only five minutes, and covered only the bare minimum. By contrast, David Miliband was interviewed almost 18 minutes about his attitude towards the EU Presidency. Lord Pearson was not asked directly why he favoured withdrawal or any other central points of party policy; the only way he introduced what he did about policy was through his own response to a question about tactics.

A feature the day before the election gave a brief overview of each of the UKIP leadership candidates. But each contribution was a soundbite of a few seconds. There was no effort was made to explore policies in any depth or to analyse the wider impact of the election on the political landscape. Again, it was the bare minimum to explain the topic.

UKIP’s Nigel Farage made one soundbite contribution to lengthy coverage of whether Tony Blair would become EU President, and the eventual appointments. He said Mr Van Rompuy and Cathy Ashton were “political pygmies”.

Other than these items about Lisbon and its aftermath, UKIP was asked to comment at any length on EU topics covered by Today only twice.

The first (amounting to 27% of total UKIP coverage) was about moves towards the metrification of British road signs, and the second about the introduction of a European parliament version of PM’s Question Time. In the former, Derek Clark, the UKIP MEP for the East Midlands was asked why he was opposed to metrification, and he responded that it was part of the unnecessary “Europeanisation” of the UK. In the latter, Nigel Farage said the new sessions would not work, largely because the need to translate contributions would slow the speed of the exchanges.

Mr Clark was able to register brief concerns about the way pressure was being put on the UK to adopt metric measures.

During the survey period, it would have been reasonably expected that UKIP would have been asked to contribute to coverage of other major EU measures. In fact, Today’s coverage of the impact of EU directives on Britain was very limited and

UKIP’s role in that was non-existent. There were several items on the likely changes in banking regulation, and features about fisheries, agriculture (one about CAP and one about the ineptitude of Defra in making payments to farmers), and the working time directive. Each area was highly controversial and UKIP had a perspective distinct from other parties. But despite this, the party’s views were never sought. This was double bias: first, in not covering properly EU issues of importance; and second, in choosing not to include a UKIP or withdrawal perspective.

UKIP was also excluded from the discussion about steps towards committing Britain to further spending on the EU emissions policy and supporting developing countries over alleged ‘climate change’. It was notable that Friends of the Earth - who were in favour of the spending - were asked to comment about the topic, but not UKIP, despite its strong opposition to ‘climate change’ expenditure.

A rare acknowledgement that UKIP existed as a distinct political force at all came on November 4, when James Naughtie asked Trevor Kavanagh whether UKIP would benefit from the new Conservative policy on Europe. But this was further evidence of bias against UKIP in that Mr Naughtie was seeking to highlight alleged divisions among those opposed to the Lisbon Treaty.

Overall, therefore, although UKIP won 16.5% of the vote in the June European parliamentary elections, during this survey period, this was not reflected adequately in Today’s coverage of EU events. There was no effort to explore the relevance of party policies to the ratification of the Lisbon treaty. UKIP was not brought into the wider debate about the treaty, even though it was the only party that could convey the withdrawal perspective supported by a very significant proportion of the UK public.

Further, Today’s coverage of the build-up and aftermath of the ratification of the treaty did not give any opportunity for UKIP - or any other eurosceptic party - to properly challenge the need for Lisbon and its likely impact on Britain. It was not on the Today agenda.

Conservatives: The Conservatives, though pro-EU in principle, and totally opposed at leadership level to withdrawal, are usually regarded by the BBC as ‘eurosceptic’. The party’s response to ratification of the Lisbon Treaty was the only element of the English political parties’ approach to EU policy that was judged worthy of sustained coverage during the survey period.

There were a series of interviews and correspondent items that all drew attention to the Tory problems. Cumulatively, they amounted to a coordinated attempt that seemed designed to underline that the EU was a Conservative problem.

The coverage was:

September 16: interview of Edward McMillan Scott, who responded to his sacking as a Conservative MEP because of his opposition to the new Conservative alliances in the European parliament. A question that featured heavily was whether the Conservatives were divided over Europe; the whole thrust of the item appeared to be to make that point.

September 16: Nick Robinson, the BBC’s political editor, reporting from the Liberal Democrat conference chose to mention that Charles Kennedy had warned that his party could not form an alliance with the Tories because of the extreme nature of their new alliances in the European parliament.

September 22: Iain Watson, also reporting from the Liberal Democrat conference, noted that Chris Huhne had attacked the new Tory grouping as “truly shameful”, saying that they were allied with homophobes. He reported that Mr Huhne had said Mr Hague had toured Europe and come up with the dregs. It was said that Mr Huhne had dropped from his speech a reference to Mr Hague being a skinhead. By contrast, in the same programme, Nick Clegg’s multi-nation EU roots were favourably discussed.

October 5: Bulletins said that the Tory policy on the EU was under pressure, and that not holding a referendum would bother the party, while holding one would alienate EU partners. Evan Davis commented that the ‘no’ vote in Ireland took the Conservatives back to the 1990s, and Norman Smith concurred that it was a “horror” start to the party conference. A report from the Czech Republic suggested that Conservatives were locked into holding a referendum because Iain Duncan Smith had made a pact with Czech allies in 2003. Nick Robinson suggested again that the Conservative party was in difficulties because it was in a throwback to the 1990s, and meanwhile, Boris Johnson wanted a referendum.

October 6: In the newspaper review, there was mention of an FT article which said that David Cameron was a little Englander; Evan Davis suggested, in an interview with David Cameron in which EU affairs were only briefly mentioned, that people who wanted a referendum should vote UKIP; and in another feature, commentator George Parker said that there was a huge divide in the Conservative party over the EU. Matthew D’Ancona denied the party was split.

October 7: Evan Davis said that Stonewall had boycotted a Conservative conference gay event because of the party’s links with homophobes in the European parliament.

October 8: Discussion of a Tory poll which, it was highlighted that the party was in difficulties because it showed that 38% wanted complete renegotiation of the Lisbon Treaty.

October 10: John Dymond, noting that Czech president Vaclav Klaus was still not prepared to ratify Lisbon, said that the Conservatives were delighting in his “obduracy”.

October 28: Nick Robinson said it looked as though joke was on the Conservatives about the post of EU president, because Gordon Brown saw it as an opportunity to make David Cameron look isolated in Europe:

Because the message that he is pushing around Europe is, this guy, David Cameron, doesn't even want a British former prime minister to do a prominent job in Europe, this suggests that he's out of the European mainstream. David Cameron's game, let's remember here, is less a domestic one and more international. I think it helps by making a fuss now that other European leaders will pull back at the last minute from endorsing Tony Blair, and that if he does then go on to be prime minister, David Cameron, he avoids the four or five years of hell, having to live with a man.

October 29: Nick Robinson again commented that David Cameron was giving indigestion to Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy, and added that at the same time, many within his party were not happy with his EU policies.

A major interview with David Miliband and William Hague concluded by exploring Mr Miliband's concerns about the Conservative alliances in the European parliament. He said that there was no doubt that the Polish partners had condoned at least one wartime atrocity. Mr Hague denied this was the case and said the socialist grouping had members that were homophobes.

October 30: The Polish Chief Rabbi said that the Conservatives' Polish allies were not anti-Semitic.

November 3: The newspaper review mentioned claims that David Cameron would renege on his plans for an EU referendum. David Willets was asked whether party policy towards the referendum would change, but he refused to be drawn.

November 4: Bulletins said that the Conservatives would not now offer a referendum on the Lisbon treaty, but that some members of the party were calling for one. Jonny Dymond said the European Commission was worried about the attitude of the Conservatives to the EU. The idea of a Tory civil war was raised, but Mr Dymond discounted the possibility. Mark Pritchard MP was interviewed about his call for a referendum despite the change in party policy; James Naughtie suggested that it would be an ‘in or out’ question. Nick Robinson said that Mr Cameron would stand by his policy despite internal opposition. He added that Mrs Merkel and Mr Sarkozy were not impressed by Mr Cameron. Trevor Kavanagh was asked about the Tories' “troubled” relationship with the EU. He said that voters were more concerned with the economy.

November 5: Bulletins said that the Tory policy had been described as “autistic” by the French, with other claims that withdrawal from the EPP had castrated the party. Daniel Hannan’s resignation as a front-bench MEP spokesman was noted. It was also said that David Cameron was hoping to win back more powers from the EU. Correspondent Norman Smith said there had been big attacks on David Cameron, but no one would take him on. A constitutional expert said that David Cameron’s hopes of reclaiming powers were impossible. Lord Tebbit called for a sovereignty bill, Sir Stephen Wall welcomes ratification.

November 6: Following up the “autistic” Cameron claims, French minister Christine Lagarde said it was important that the EU worked together, but she strongly discounted the possibility that David Cameron would be able to repatriate powers from the EU (as he claimed he could).

November 19: Europhile Conservative Lord Patten was asked about his preferences to become EU President. David Cameron was interviewed about his change of policy towards the EU. It was suggested that the pledge on the referendum was “cardboard”; went back on “cast-iron” guarantees; (several times) that he hadn’t had a qualification to the referendum promise, that if the treaty was not ratified there would be no referendum; that people had been seriously misled by his promise; that he was playing with words; that he could not legislate for this never happen again; that he could not repatriate powers from the EU as he was promising; that he was talking about retrieving powers that had been ceded; and that he would not have an EU ‘in or out’ referendum.

Thus, there was frequent mention throughout the survey period to potential problems; overall, in comparison to Labour, the Conservatives were given an extremely tough time. Their change of policy towards the referendum on Lisbon was heavily scrutinised and the party accused repeatedly of breaking promises. The party was frequently said by commentators - most notably by chief political reporter Nick Robinson - to be in danger of descending to 1990s-style civil war.

In addition, the party’s decision to form a new political alliance in the European parliament was subjected to close scrutiny. This was treated editorially in parallel with the change in policy towards the referendum and was designed to underline that the Conservatives had deep problems with their policies towards the EU.

Coverage of the adoption of the treaty focused on whether there would be a Tory civil war, with an associated acceptance that the issue remained deeply divisive.

Conversely, there was no editorial effort to ask why the treaty had been accepted by Labour and the Liberal Democrats without a referendum, or explored the continuing hostility of the British people to the treaty. Nick Robinson reported attacks by both parties on the eurosceptic approach to the EU, but made no

corresponding mention of the eurosceptics’ concerns (from any quarter) about their approach.

This was in keeping with previous surveys which have shown that the EU is perceived editorially almost entirely as a “problem” for eurosceptics. Clearly, the Conservative change from supporting a referendum to trying to repatriate powers was a significant change in direction and was newsworthy. But seriously disproportionate effort was put on covering the negative aspects of the change.

It was also striking in this respect that when Lady Ashton was appointed High Representative, Lord Kinnock was interviewed but no effort was made to push him into explaining why such an appointment and such procedures could be regarded as reflecting what the British electorate actually wanted.

In effect, Lord Kinnock was asked only what was right about the developing EU project; and while no editorial effort at all was made towards exploring what was wrong, the Conservative Party (and by implication, eurosceptic opinion) was continually projected to be in deep trouble over their approach.

It should also be noted that Today made an unusual effort to show that David Miliband’s claims about Michael Kaminski, the Polish party leader who was a new ally of the Conservatives, were not supported by the Chief Rabbi of Poland. But the interview with him was immediately followed by a comment from Nick Robinson, who said that despite the remarks that undermined Mr Miliband’s case,

...he will broaden the attack, I’ve no doubt, to talk about the other parties that the Tories are allied with.

Thus, Mr Robinson immediately strongly implied - without explanation - that there were problems with other Conservative allies.

Labour: Labour scarcely figured in Today’s coverage of the Lisbon Treaty. There were about a dozen interviews with senior Labour figures about EU affairs during the survey period, but only two were about the ratification process. The only senior government figure to be interviewed specifically about the implications of ratification was David Miliband on October 29, in a two-hander with William Hague. Even then, he was not asked to account for why the government had signed the treaty, but instead to look forward to whether Tony Blair should become President of the EU when ratification was complete. The first question put to him was how Tony Blair could be supported in his candidacy to become EU President when his support of the Iraq war had painfully divided Europe “right down the middle”. William Hague was then asked why he wanted a “weak” EU President (i.e. someone who was not Tony Blair), and David Miliband was invited by James Naughtie to respond. This was the opportunity for him to say:

That’s just the sort of ad hominem argument, play the man, not the ball case . . .

WH: (*speaking over*) It’s not the man at all.

DM: ...that really does bring politics into disrepute. The truth is, we've said all along that the new Lisbon Treaty would make the European Union more efficient and more effective. And it's a fact that the shift of global power to China, to India means that for Europeans, we need not just to work with our bilateral relations as individual countries, we need the European Union to be a strong voice globally. We're talking here about the European Council, not a parish council. It's all very well to say you want a chairmanic (sic) role to quote David Cameron, when you're talking about a parish council, we're talking here about the European Council, we're talking about a five-year prospectus to agree how the European Union wants to approach its major relationships, how it wants to focus its priorities, and how it's going to make a difference around the world.

James Naughtie interjected that if the role was occupied by a prime minister with an international reputation, it took on a “completely different tinge”. David Miliband responded:

No, because the President of the European Council will be answerable to the 27 heads of government of the European nations, as it should be. This is actually the President of the Council, one of the most intergovernmental parts of the European construction, not the supranational. And as for the 130 embassies in all of that, at the moment in those 130 countries there are two European offices, one for the European Council and one for the European Commission. What the Lisbon Treaty says is it makes sense to have one, so that's why it reduces duplication, it’s common sense.

Mr Naughtie claimed that the appointment of Mr Blair would be a disaster:

...because he would play absolutely into the hands of the sceptics in precisely the way that Mr Hague has just suggested, and say, look, here we are, what happens, you know, we get a Tory government that is elected, if that happens in six months time to take a very robust view to Europe - and what do they discover? Without a vote, the guy that they've been fighting for most of the last 13 years is there before them.

DM: And he would be answerable to a British prime minister and the 26 of the Prime Ministers of Europe. The truth is, there is a fundamental difference between William Hague and I. He was a member of the John Major government which launched the beef war and lost, and that was a reflection of a deep degree of hostility in the Conservative Party to Europe. That hostility has grown in the last 10 or 12 years, whereas on our, on my

side of politics, we believe that while the European Union is far from perfect, it does need reform, the last thing it needs is a continuation of the institutional squabbles that dominated the last seven or eight years.

Mr Naughtie then moved on to ask Mr Miliband about Michael Kaminski, the “Polish MEP who is one of the new allies of David Cameron”. He said that despite claims from Mr Miliband that he was anti-Semitic, the Chief Rabbi of Poland had said he was a friend of Israel who had spoken out against anti-Semitism.

Mr Miliband stuck to his original allegations and said they were supported by Edward McMillan-Scott, the expelled Tory MEP. He added that James Naughtie was making a “very serious allegation” against him. Mr Hague responded that Mr Miliband should apologise, and in response to further probing from Mr Naughtie, said all of the new Conservative allies had been carefully checked out. He added that they were “mainstream”. Mr Miliband reiterated some of the claims against Mr Kaminski, to which Mr Hague responded that many of the Socialist allies in the European parliament had suspect beliefs, including homophobia.

Thus overall, Mr Miliband was able to use the interview to put across that he thought Lisbon made the EU more efficient, and to push his claims that the Conservatives were allied with extremists. Mr Hague obviously countered the claims, and James Naughtie posed one strikingly devil’s advocate question in suggesting that the appointment of Tony Blair would be seen as a disaster in some quarters.

But Mr Miliband had very substantial space to counter these points - more than 800 words, almost as much in one interview as the entire contribution of UKIP interviewees during the period as a whole. And James Naughtie did not attempt to interrupt Mr Miliband much; it was not overall a sharply adversarial exchange in that he was allowed to develop points at some length. By contrast, the rate of interruption of David Cameron when he was interviewed about the change in Conservative policy towards the EU was much greater.

This could not be seen in any sense as the government being held to account over an unpopular policy; it was more a case of a government minister being given a platform to explain why he thought both the Lisbon Treaty was wonderful and that the government was totally right in what it was doing.

On November 3, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, was asked about a European Union ruling that British banks who had received state aid should shrink their operations. There was no discussion about whether the EU’s intervention was necessary or appropriate; he simply said that the government was already doing what was required.

BBC Presenters and correspondents: As has been evidenced above, presenters were demonstrably tougher in their approach to interviewing eurosceptics than others involved in the EU debate. UKIP was accused of being “amateurish” in its handling of its affairs; no similar question was put at any point to - for example - the Labour Party.

On November 20, after the appointment of Lady Ashton, Jonny Dymond said without qualification that foreign policy remained firmly in the capitals of member states. Gavin Hewitt expressed the same point of view that Europe was back into the era of big nation states. A discussion between newspaper correspondents came to the same conclusion. There was no effort to include a sceptic perspective or to challenge this line - it was actually promulgated by the BBC staff.

It was suggested in a question to Neil Kinnock that he might be pleased with the appointment of Lady Ashton because it meant that the EU had moved away from a federalist approach. Lord Kinnock advanced the view - without opposition - that the EU posts did not need to be democratically approved because the EU was working on the same basis of the US model of presidential executive appointments. The glaring gap in his argument - that the US appointments were made by a president with a direct popular mandate to form a government - were not picked up.

On the day of the appointments of the EU president and Lady Ashton, no opinion from a eurosceptic was sought, other than the soundbite from Nigel Farage - it seemed to be a discussion among friends rather than an effort to probe the implications - both bad and good - of the appointments.

Correspondent reports also pointedly made reference to the need for the Lisbon Treaty on two occasions:

October 1: Jonny Dymond said that the Irish were now in favour of the Lisbon Treaty because of “conservative prudence”. He made an assumption that the EU was a safe option in terms of fiscal prudence and most of his item about the referendum revolved round opinions of those who supported this view.

October 2: Jonny Dymond said in bulletins that the ‘yes’ campaign in Ireland had been better organised and better thought out. He added that voters were not prepared to face the “turmoil” of another ‘no’ vote.

Other points: The main reaction to the ‘yes’ vote in Ireland was a discussion on October 3 between Charles Grant, the director of the Centre for European Reform and Wilfred Martens, former Prime Minister of Belgium and president of the European People’s Party Group, both obviously strong Europhiles. Both men warned that the EU needed strengthening, and that the whole debate over the

The BBC and “Europe”: Analysis of Today output September - December 2010

Lisbon Treaty had cost the EU credibility. John Humphrys drew attention to Tory doubts about the EU, and said his stance could weaken the EU. Mr Martens said this was a “real political problem”.

The main reaction to the appointment of the first EU President and Lady Ashton as High Representative was through the interview with Lord Kinnock, who was also a Europhile.