

# CITY A.M.

## Lord Adonis is spot on, BBC bias could swing an election

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Lord Adonis doesn't like the BBC very much these days.

Peruse the arch-Remainer's Twitter account, and you will regularly see denouncements of the "Brexit Broadcasting Corporation", which supposedly created Nigel Farage himself, and determined the eventual Brexit referendum result.

It "fanned the populist flames" and might better be described as "the public disservice broadcaster", according to the former Labour cabinet minister.

This relentless assault has left some Remain-backing columnists questioning the peer's sanity. Nick Cohen has mused about whether Adonis has gone "mad".

Many hardline Brexiteers are asking the same question, for different reasons. Between 2005 and 2014, the BBC's flagship Radio 4 Today programme interviewed 4,275 speakers on EU themes. Just three per cent of them favoured leaving the EU.

To the extent that there has been bias, surely it was in not giving proportionate voice to the 30 to 40 per cent of the population who consistently told pollsters they wanted a Brexit? If the Beeb created Farage, who represented over a third of these Leaver appearances, it was only because they didn't have anyone else on to represent this widely-held opinion.

Media bias is a difficult subject, because ultimately journalists are human beings. They have their own priors, sources, and sense of what is important. What stories they run, who they quote, and how these are presented all involve subjective judgments.

Bias need not mean some top-down dictum or imposed worldview, but can arise as a consequence of hiring people with similar viewpoints and backgrounds.

In a referendum, a duty to act impartially between campaigns can theoretically lead to an equivalence between two viewpoints that, on other metrics, would be considered unequal too.

Far from being mad, Lord Adonis appears to know better than his colleagues just how significant the consequences can be when it comes to how things are presented on the BBC.

In that, he is similar to eurosceptics who for years bemoaned unfair portrayals of the issues. His campaign is one borne out of frustration at the result, but his aim is to pressurise the BBC into give Brexiteers less air time and to paint Brexit in a more negative light.

And the reason is clear: the BBC is an immensely powerful organisation. The way it presents news could potentially have significant effects on election results.

In 2017, Patrick Kennedy and Andrea Prat, economists from the Columbia Business School, analysed 18 countries' news media markets to develop a "power index". Across all countries, the UK had the most concentrated media sector, mainly due to the Beeb.

Over all mediums, the BBC reaches 81 per cent of people who consume news, and has a 36 per cent attention share. It has the most power to affect public opinion of any news organisation worldwide.

According to the researchers, it would require just five per cent of the BBC's audience to be completely trusting of its output to give it the power to swing a close election by one percentage point. It could swing an election by two points, if 10 per cent of consumers were naive.

This makes it much more powerful than, say, the Daily Mail. To achieve the same result would require 38 per cent of Mail readers to be trusting.

Poll after poll suggests that the BBC is the most trusted news source in Britain, and therefore the combination of its reach and reputation means its output could have substantial impacts on elections and public opinion.

Of course, trust in the BBC has arisen in part, no doubt, because it has been trustworthy. Newspapers have editorial viewpoints and priors, and the BBC does make a big effort to be impartial.

But with great power comes great responsibility. And the issue of bias is critical, as it only requires a small proportion of people to take the presentation of an issue at face value to really affect public opinion.

My instinct is that Lord Adonis is wrong on the central charge. In fact, I think that on some metrics – not least relative to public opinion – the BBC is still biased in a firmly anti-Brexit direction. But his repetitive denouncements of the BBC are perfectly rational given his aims.

Ahead of any eventual parliamentary vote on the final EU deal, or maybe even a second referendum, Brexit is going to dominate the airwaves and online in a way comparable to the referendum.

Given the BBC's power, changing the way that debate is represented could come with a much bigger payoff than any campaigning by a Lord could achieve.

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