

## MEDIA COVERAGE OF GORDON BROWN'S 'BIGOTGATE' IN THE 2010 BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION

Fathi Bourmeche

 [orcid.org/0000-0001-5595-3878](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5595-3878)

Faculty of Letters and Humanities

University of Sfax, Tunisia

### ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to gain a better understanding of the effect of media on public opinion, with particular attention to Gordon Brown's 'bigotgate' taking place in April 2010 during his campaign for the British general election. The paper seeks to argue that the event had a major impact on Brown's political career as well as Labour's image on the British political landscape. The corpus of the study includes a selection of 100 articles from *The Guardian* which are qualitatively analysed, using media agenda-setting and framing, and juxtaposed to 30 Ipsos Mori opinion polls dealing with the event and related issues. Results show that the event had major repercussions on the British political scene. It damaged Brown's political career, contributing to Labour's inability to secure their fourth term in Ten Downing Street and increased Britons' concern about mass migration, particularly from Eastern Europe.

**Keywords:** agenda-setting, 'bigotgate', Gordon Brown, *The Guardian*, Eastern Europeans, election, framing, Labour, media, migration

### ABSTRAKT

#### Medialne relacje dotyczące sprawy *Bigotgate* premiera Gordona Browna podczas kampanii wyborczej w 2010 roku

Artykuł pokazuje wpływ mediów na opinię publiczną na przykładzie skandalu zwanego *Bigotgate*, a wywołanego przez wypowiedź premiera Wielkiej Brytanii Gordona Browna, który w kwietniu 2010 roku podczas swej kampanii wyborczej obraził wieloletnią zwolenniczkę Partii Pracy, nazywając swą rozmówczynię bigotką, co nagrał mikrofon telewizji Sky News, które emitowała słowa polityka. Wydarzenie to miało duży wpływ na karierę polityczną Gordona Browna, a także wizerunek Partii Pracy, wyniki wyborów parlamentarnych oraz brytyjski krajobraz polityczny. Artykuł prezentuje wyniki jakościowej analizy 100 artykułów

z dziennika *The Guardian*, odczytanych przez pryzmat teorii oprawy i ustanawiania agendy. Wyniki pokazują, że sprawa *Bigotgate* miała poważne reperkusje na brytyjskiej scenie politycznej, zniszczyła karierę polityczną Browna, przyczyniając się do przegranej Partii Pracy, a także do zwiększenia zaniepokojenia Brytyjczyków masową migracją, zwłaszcza z Europy Wschodniej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *agenda-setting*, *Bigotgate*, Gordon Brown, *The Guardian*, mieszkańcy Europy Wschodniej, wybory, teoria oprawy, Partia Pracy, media, migracja

### *Background to the study*

Geoffrey Craig argues that public opinion is potent in a way that could overthrow the strongest politicians; it is a power originating from the democratic principles on which a political system is based. Public opinion “mobilises principles of «classical democracy» [...] it is the expression of a majority view, or the most popular opinion of the voting population; and it represents a means by which people can participate in the life of the society” (Craig 2004, p. 154). Indeed, it was George Gallup’s issue polls which have enhanced modern public opinion research, asking regularly since the late 1930s, “What is the most important problem facing the country today?” This type of question has allowed the general public to define their own issues without the interference of pollsters or newspapers’ editors. This means that Gallup’s respondents would define the most important issues of the day and share their views with the public, as well as to policymakers via the media “without any filters or restrictions” (Donsbach, Traugott 2008, p. 6). However, in Robert Entman’s view, the media contribute to “what people think [...] to shape what they think about” (Entman 1989, p. 349). In the same vein, Maxwell McCombs holds that “our mass media teachers repeat topics, at times with great emphasis, at other times just in passing [and] the accumulation of these lessons [...] is reflected in the responses of citizen students when [they] inquire about the most important issues” (McCombs 2004, p. 47).

The fifth European Union enlargement<sup>1</sup> brought about an unexpected influx of new arrivals – many from Eastern Europe – that became a focal issue in British newspapers. The influx was covered in relation to the British national identity, raising concerns about Labour’s handling of the trend. Such concerns were reflected in Brown’s encounter with Gillian Duffy in Rochdale, Manchester, during his 2010 British general election campaign. Duffy stopped Brown and asked him a few questions, including one about the influx of Eastern Europeans, and complained about the unexpected influx of these new migrants without obtaining any acceptable

1 The first wave of enlargement happened on 1 May 2004, when eight new members from the Eastern and Central Europe were added: Poland, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, known as A8, in addition to Malta and Cyprus. The second wave happened on 1 January 2007, when Romania and Bulgaria, known as A2, were added.

answer from the Prime Minister. While getting into his car, Brown expressed his dissatisfaction with such an encounter and described Duffy as a *bigoted* woman while his microphone was still on. The entire incident was broadcasted live on television, and placed the Prime Minister in a difficult situation despite his subsequent visit to Duffy to express his apologies.

This paper examines the event's impact on British public opinion in relation to the 2010 general election. The *bigotgate* episode seemed to have put Brown in an inconvenient spot, damaging his reputation and ending his political career. The goal is to try and better understand how media coverage can shape public opinion and the British political landscape. In addition, this research tries to validate McCombs' argument about the power of media effects, using the 2010 British general election as a case study. With the benefit of hindsight, the 2015, 2017 and 2019 elections had a more significant impact on Britain's relationship with the EU. The 2010 election, considered as the "most eventful and dramatic" (Bartle et al. 2011, p. 147) in the history of British elections, resulted in a coalition government between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, signalling the re-emergence of a three-party system on the British political landscape for some observers.

### *Methodology*

This paper is guided by McCombs' agenda-setting and framing theories, with the assumption that framing is the second level of agenda-setting. Agenda-setting is concerned with the transfer of object salience from media representations of the world to the audience's minds through a selection of the issues to be covered. For newspapers, agenda-setting effects go beyond the salience of issues to include the effect on consumers' behaviour towards the salient issues. Framing is the transfer of attribute salience, with attributes being the range of properties and characteristics related to the object or issue covered in the media. The way these attributes influence the public is known as the second level of agenda-setting (McCombs 2004).

In McCombs's view, both traditional agenda-setting and attribute agenda-setting are "media effects of considerable magnitude [...] that encompass both the audience's initial level of attention and its subsequent understanding about a message's subject" (McCombs 2004, p. 85). Issue salience can offer insights about people's voting preferences in that "beyond influencing the salience of issues on the public agenda, the media's agenda can at times also advantage a particular political party because of issue ownership, the perception among voters that one political party is more capable than another of handling certain issues" (McCombs 2004, p. 130). The assumption here is that the Conservatives were deemed better than Labour in handling the influx of Eastern Europeans. From this perspective, the study seeks to focus on the transfer of salience of Brown's media gaffe and its related attributes to see its impact on Britons' attitudes towards Brown, as well as the Labour Party, particularly within the context of the 2010 general election. In addition, attention is drawn to the transfer of salience of immigration from media to the

public, mainly with respect to the influx of Eastern Europeans deemed to be one of the most important issues facing the country, and therefore potentially affected voting behaviour during the 2010 general election.

### *Objectives*

The main objective of this study is to examine the way media shapes public opinion and validate McCombs's theory on the effects of media agendas and frames on the public. The study, therefore, seeks to answer two research questions in a bid to validate McCombs's theory. The first question is "How did *the Guardian* cover Brown's *bigotgate*?" The reasoning behind this question is an attempt to gain a better understanding of the way a British newspaper represented such an event, paying special attention to the different attributes associated with Brown's media gaffe. The second question is: "What was the impact of such representation on British public opinion?" Answering this question is important because one would gain more insight into the way framing and media agendas shaped public opinion of Brown, the Labour party and its handling of the influx of Eastern Europeans. This would be achieved through a juxtaposition of media representations and opinion polls surrounding the incident.

### *Corpus description*

The corpus of the study consists of a selection of 100 articles from *The Guardian*, downloaded from its official website, and 30 Ipsos Mori polls which are also available online on the official site. Five keywords were used in the selection process: *bigot*, *Brown*, *Eastern Europeans*, *immigration*, and *Duffy*. I chose *The Guardian* based on three main factors: newspaper market, type, and net browsers, in addition to its affiliation. *The Guardian* is a left-of-centre British newspaper owned by the Guardian Media Group since 1993 and it has remained for many years the only mass-circulation national left-leaning daily. In fact, *The Guardian*, originally founded in 1821 as the *Manchester Guardian*, is an upper market broadsheet and among the top three newspapers in Britain, with more than 100 million readers in 2020, compared to approximately 26 million in July 2009. Therefore, I contend that its coverage of events could be more robust and serious compared to tabloids such as *The Sun* or the *Daily Mail*, even though both of these are also British newspapers with high readerships, and thus worth researching. I chose Ipsos Mori as a source of opinion polls as it is among the largest research companies in Britain, specialising in various areas of research, including media and technology.

## *Findings and discussion*

A close examination of the corpus revealed that the media's agenda of Brown's *bigotgate* incident and its framing attributes marked a turning point for Labour's electoral campaign in 2010. The reportage aroused conflicting views about Brown and Labour's chances in securing their fourth term in government. Media coverage of the *bigotgate* episode dealt a serious blow to Brown, damaged his image, and negatively impacted his electoral campaign. The reportage also highlighted an increase in democratic accountability in Britain by exposing the Prime Minister's character and personality. The implication here is that media coverage of *bigotgate* seemed to have considerably impacted Britons' attitude towards Brown and Labour, and influenced their voting intentions, as reflected by the opinion polls and the election results. Furthermore, the incident seemed to have increased Britons' concern about the mass migration of Eastern Europeans, with the polls indicating that this issue was among the most important issues facing the country. *Bigotgate* also divided British voters about the impact of mass migration on British society. Eastern Europeans, occasionally depicted as an asset to Britain, were now considered a major threat to British society in many respects.

### *The bigotgate event: Damaging Brown and bruising Labour's campaign*

Brown's blunder on Sky News hot mic while campaigning in Rochdale, Lancashire for the 2010 general election represented a turning point during Labour's campaign. Brown described his meeting with Gillian Duffy, the 65-year-old lifelong Labour supporter as a disaster and called Duffy a *bigoted* woman after she asked him a series of questions, including one on Eastern Europeans. Despite his later apology to Duffy, *bigotgate* placed Brown in a sticky situation, damaged his reputation, and subsequently ended his political career. On 28 April 2010, the same day *bigotgate* occurred, an article reported on his apology and emphasised the implication of the event on Brown's image. The journalists argued that the incident raised scepticism about the Prime Minister's "volatile" character and dipped Labour's morale to the extent that some of Brown's aides were furious, with one of whom describing him as "a pathetic blame shifter" and another calling him "two-faced". Similarly, a YouGov poll for *The Sun* showed that *bigotgate* had major repercussions for Labour, revealing that Labour was at 27 per cent, down 2 points, compared to the Conservatives at 34 per cent, up 1 point and the Liberal Democrats at 31 per cent, up 3 points (Wintour, Curtis 2010).

The next day, another article reiterated the event's impact on Brown's reputation, arguing that Duffy, who had left home to get a loaf of bread from a nearby shop, had altered the course of the 2010 election by significantly lowering Brown's chances. Brown had taken a gamble that day by leaving conversations with loyalists in his sitting-room, and exposed himself to potential attacks from an ordinary voter in Rochdale, a decision which led to *bigotgate*. Journalists also pointed out that his

remarks and his placement of blame on one of his closest aides, right after being warmly welcomed in public, unveiled the poorest of his characteristics, and the disrespect and scornfulness of a voter. Yet, Nick Clegg, then leader of the Liberal Democrats, who seemed to be more understanding, stated that, “If we all had recordings of what we mutter under our breath, we would all be crimson with embarrassment” (Curtis 2010), thus emphasising the fact such comments could have been uttered by any other politician under similar circumstances.

Pensioners, mostly loyal to Labour, also reacted to the episode in Rochdale, as reported in another article. An 82-year-old former docker from Bristol and lifelong Labour voter argued that Brown’s gaffe was likely to prompt his shift to another party. In his view, the event reinforced his distrust towards Brown, which led him to think of David Cameron, then leader of the Conservatives, as the right candidate for Prime Minister. Knowle, the Bristol South constituency and Labour stronghold, which had always been secured primarily by the votes of traditional elderly supporters, was shocked by the episode. Many Knowle residents described Brown as a “pillock” due to the incident, which seemingly affected their voting behaviour as some of them expressed their intention not to vote Labour (Morris 2010).

Another pensioner, an 80-year-old former teacher, expressed his view about Brown and considered him an “excellent man with a poor appearance” who is saving Britain from “disaster but unfortunately he doesn’t look like a man who saved us from disaster.” Thus, he intended to vote for the Liberal Democrats instead in a bid to keep the Conservatives out. Yet, another pensioner, an 81-year-old TGWU<sup>2</sup> worker for more than 30 years and a lifelong Labour voter, said that he would not change his mind about his party loyalty despite his dislike of the Prime Minister, otherwise his grandmother “would turn in her grave” (Morris 2010). The same article also revealed more support for Brown via the results of an unpublished YouGov/*Sun* poll conducted on 527 people, which showed that 50 per cent of the interviewees believed the event did not have any impact on Brown’s reputation by agreeing with the statement: “It’s a storm in a teacup. Mr Brown was simply trying to let off steam in private. We should not think the worse of him” (Siddique 2010). Contrastingly, 46 per cent agreed with the statement: “Mr Brown is a hypocrite – saying one thing in public and the opposite in private”. However, the survey showed that 9 per cent of respondents answered that the *bigotgate* event was less likely to make them vote for Brown, compared to 3 per cent who stated that the event was more likely to make them vote for Labour. Furthermore, most of the people polled did not believe that Brown’s gaffe would have any impact on their voting behaviour (Siddique 2010).

In another article, other readers also expressed a variety of views on the episode, with one comment pitying the media, including *The Guardian*, for their focus on immigration when Duffy’s conversation touched upon other issues such as pensions and taxes. Although Brown’s remark was considered inappropriate, it was a politician’s reaction after a difficult day. Thus, even though it was a mere

2 The acronym stands for Transport and General Workers’ Union, one of the largest trade unions in Britain throughout the twentieth century.

“storm in a teacup” for Brown, it was a “magnificent storm for the media and all the many Brown haters around” (A terrible gaffe 2010). For another reader, the day *bigotgate* occurred was a good day for democracy because it showed people around the world that Britons can meet their elected representatives and criticise them openly without being worried about violent reactions. Even though Britons were familiar with such incidents, Brown went above and beyond by apologising in public and in private, for his mistake, when similar mistakes have happened to thousands of people, mistakes that would be incredible in a large number of countries (A terrible gaffe 2010).

Another reader, with twenty years of experience working in television and radio, pointed out that failure in retrieving the microphone by the sound recordist as soon as they had finished recording an interview or a film had never happened personally throughout his career. He also added that such a recording without the person's knowledge had never happened to him, especially in Brown's case in Rochdale, which was obviously “off camera” and in privacy, thus blaming Sky News for such a gaffe. In addition, he wondered about the frequency of similar recordings for other politicians without their consent during the campaign for the 2010 general election. Another comment included a verse from the Bible: “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone,” asking anyone, be it politician, journalist, or voter, to claim that he or she had never made similar mistakes in their lifetime. In other words, Brown's *bigotgate* could have happened to any other politician, who would say things in private which they would not have liked to be exposed in public, thus providing a defence for Brown (A terrible gaffe 2010).

Kenneth Roy, a reputable journalist with more than fifty years of experience in the field, and Roy Greenslade, Professor of Journalism at City, University of London, published another article in May 2010. Roy was against both the broadcast and release of Brown's remarks, emphasising the difference between the two in that the former was considered as an incident that might happen in one's life whereas the latter was an “invasion of privacy,” thus not constituting an issue of public interest. In his view, Brown had simply expressed a “personal distaste” towards the ideas of someone he had just met. Yet, Greenslade held a different stance and assumed that the event could be considered a case of public interest, given that it had involved a hypocritical attitude or insincerity towards Duffy because Brown had not discussed the issue of immigration with her but had made such comments about her afterwards, i.e., after getting into the car with the microphone on (Greenslade 2010).

Such views were also reflected in opinion polls, providing evidence of the power of media in shaping public opinion in relation to the 2010 general election. The Ipsos Mori Final Election Poll, conducted on 5 May 2010, confirmed the Conservatives lead over Labour, 36 per cent (+3) to 29 per cent (-7) and 27 per cent (+5) for the Liberal Democrats, predicting a Conservatives win that would not be enough to form a government and thus leading to a hung Parliament<sup>3</sup>. Importantly, a considerable

3 The poll was conducted on a sample of 1,216 British electors, basing the findings on the answers of 930 people who were certain to vote.



portion of Labour and the Liberal Democrats supporters were undecided, 34 per cent and 32 per cent respectively, compared to 20 per cent among the Conservatives, with 25 per cent of undecided voters who said they would switch to the Liberal Democrats, 18 per cent to Labour and 17 per cent to the Conservatives. Among Labour and Conservative supporters who did not make up their minds, they were more likely to switch to the Liberal Democrats rather than each other whereas undecided voters among the Liberal Democrats supporters would more likely switch to Labour. This could confirm the poll's prediction of a Conservatives win under the assumption that both Labour's and the Liberal Democrats' undecided voters would make the difference on election day. In terms of satisfaction, Cameron was still seen as the favourite to lead the country with 33 per cent, down 5 points from a previous poll, compared to Brown with 29 per cent, presumably impacted by the *bigotgate* event.

### *Brown's bigotgate: Increasing Britons' concern about the influx of Eastern Europeans*

Rochdale was said to have dealt a serious blow to Brown on his way back to Downing Street. Duffy, on her way to get a loaf of bread, inflicted great damage to Brown after raising the issue of the influx from Eastern Europe. People in the area were proud of her for raising such a concern. John Sutton, one of the locals, considered her as honest and upfront. Another, Mr. Ashworth, saw her as a hero of the 2010 general election. More importantly, another lady claimed, on the blog of the Rochdale *Observer*, that Duffy was absolutely right to be concerned about Eastern Europeans, being herself "badgered by Eastern European women carrying babies, begging for money and thrusting handwritten notes under my nose claiming they are homeless and without food" only to be seen later in the local café with their mobile phones and cigarettes (Orr 2010). Through this perspective, the issue of immigration, which is causing problems for people in Rochdale, could influence results of this marginal seat (Orr 2010). One of the locals in Bristol, a 68-year-old retired shop worker, having supported Labour for more than 20 years, was having second thoughts about his choice for the election, arguing that the issue of immigration was everybody's concern. In other words, the issue was not confined to white Britons and the BNP (British National Party) but also to British Asians who were increasingly worried about mass immigration (Morris 2010).

A few days after the event, Clegg's amnesty proposal, for instance, was reported to be a convenient solution, emphasising the fact that Cameron's severe criticism of the plan foiled a reasonable policy suggested by the Liberal Democrats. Clegg's initial plan was to grant British citizenship to undocumented immigrants with a 10-year residence in Britain, which was met by severe criticism from the Conservatives, with poster vehicles showing that the Liberal Democrats were welcoming illegal immigrants and allowing their partners to join them. Yet, Clegg's plan was said to be less radical than Obama's, for instance, in the sense that his intention was to enable



illegal immigrants to apply for indefinite leave to remain if they learn English and prove that they had no criminal record. They would also undergo a two-year probation before applying for citizenship, practically creating a 12-year residence period requirement in Britain. However, Obama's plan was meant to impose a fine, along with mastery of English on illegal immigrants to be placed on bottom of the list of those seeking US citizenship (Travis 2010).

Clegg's plan was meant to reduce the existing measure, fourteen-year limit, already followed by both Labour and Conservative governments, potentially benefiting around 3,000 to 4,000 people on a yearly basis. In this sense, Cameron's claim that Clegg's plan would add 600,000 beneficiaries to welfare, council housing and the right to reunification was unreasonable, as the figure was an estimation about the total number of illegal immigrants made two years before. It seemed that Clegg failed to fight back Cameron by claiming, during the televised debate, that 80 per cent of immigration into Britain was from the European Union instead of arguing against Cameron's plan to curb the inflow, given that such a plan would apply for a mere 20 per cent of the total number of immigrants, as estimated by the Home Office (Travis 2010). Indeed, it was revealed that immigration from Eastern Europe was among the ten key issues that shaped the campaign for the 2010 general election, particularly following Brown's *bigot gaffe* which "shone a light on an issue bubbling under" (General election 2010) in the election. The other issues included the funding gap, the polls, GDP, Cameron's 'Big society' and the TV debates (General election 2010).

Another article emphasised the impact of the *bigot gaffe* not only on Labour but also on the Liberal Democrats. Labour's policies on immigration, particularly in terms of the new points-based system, restrictions on A2 immigrants (Bulgarians and Romanians who became EU citizens in January 2007), along with the construction of detention centres for asylum, showed that the party had been concerned about the issue. Thus, Brown's bigot comment on Duffy's concern about immigration was illogical. Yet, there seems to be a cross-party agreement on the failure of Labour in relation to immigration policies. A number of politicians from the three major parties were cautious against further EU enlargement, presumably contributing to high migration levels. But, the Liberal Democrats seemed to be "soft" on immigration despite offering to "clean up the mess" of Labour and the Conservatives in relation to the deportation of the huge number of illegal immigrants. What is more, the Liberal Democrats were also considered as "soft" on Europe. As for Labour and the Conservatives, though they had no intention to cut Britain's ties with the European Union, they were ambitious to carry out positive reforms within the EU (Orr 2010), including potential changes on free mobility, presumably among the main factors behind the influx of Eastern Europeans to the UK.

Another article reported on some Poles' reactions to Brown's comment in Rochdale, mostly supporting Brown's spontaneous remarks. Poles living in Hammersmith, with three-generations of Polish immigrants, wondered about the row over Brown's comments on Duffy, though acknowledging increasing tolerance about Britons' prejudice against Eastern Europeans which in the case of the Black community

would be described as racist behaviour. The event at Rochdale was the only topic debated in the Polish social and cultural centre in Hammersmith, west London, among Poles. A 52-year-old Polish electrician who had been in Britain for thirty years, argued that for Brown to be a strong leader, should not be punished for one single remark as it meant that he was a human being and not a robot. Another Pole expressed his dissatisfaction with using Eastern Europeans as “whipping boys” to raise Britons’ concern about immigration (Jones 2010).

On the same day, an Eastern European female researcher published an article, with the lead reading: “This disenfranchised eastern European will receive no apology” (Popova 2010). In other words, it was expected that following Brown’s comments on Duffy’s query and his personal apology, there should be another apology for Eastern Europeans. The researcher strongly believed that Duffy’s query, as well as Brown’s comments, were unacceptable, and thus expected some reaction against Duffy on Twitter. But to her surprise, it had taken her six hours to find one person out of fifty calling out Brown’s bigoted remark (Popova 2010).

The researcher pointed out that she was paying a high income tax rate, very likely much higher than natives’ rates. The implication is that she was contributing to the economy and British society, and possibly paying more than she should have. As for her fellow Eastern Europeans whose contribution to the British economy was significant, she emphasised that their stay was particularly driven by their wish to improve their life standards. Therefore, this immigrant was upset by Duffy’s query, placing Eastern Europeans as a “cheap target for political point scoring because Duffy and the 60 million people like her have a vote, and I and the couple of hundred thousand people like me don’t, and therefore she will always get a grovelling apology from the prime minister, and we won’t” (Popova 2010). Popova was wondering whether Eastern Europeans would be more noticeable if they stopped paying taxes, and intended to start a campaign encouraging all immigrants not to pay taxes. She was also keen on challenging Duffy by taking the citizenship test. Moreover, she discovered, though only after a while, that a politician would have no alternative but “to grovel to the bigots,” as necessitated by the British political culture. In a sense, a politician, in this case Brown, would put an end to his political career by making the argument for the benefits of immigrants through their massive contribution to the economy (Popova 2010), though Brown had always argued for the positive impact of immigrants.

One other article emphasised that the main issue for Labour was related to politics rather than policies in the sense that Brown’s remarks were said to have confirmed the belief that any views on immigration would be judged as racist. The journalist pointed out that with the rise of the BNP and other anti-migration voices, the left seemed to have lost the ability to decipher the “nuance and complexity” of the issue. Anti-immigrant activists’ major concern to deal with immigration was neither human rights nor economic benefits; they were rather concerned in people’s interest in curbing the inflow of immigrants as well as the latter’s contribution to their host country. There were some moderate opinions focused on costs and benefits with respect to the impact on local communities and on immigrants, the necessity

of control and flexibility, without being voiced publicly whether by the left or by the right (Mulley 2010).

The same article argued that the current immigration system, though not a perfect one, was working, reinforcing the idea that Labour's major problem with immigration was politics rather than policies. Had they adopted a different political approach as soon as they came to power in 1997, they would have avoided the current chaotic situation due to failed policies. This could have been achieved through recognising some managerial problems, including the chaotic legacy of the asylum system, as well as mistakes, particularly the inability to predict the upsurge of immigration after the fifth EU enlargement. In this view, a "new vocabulary and narrative" would be needed by the left, as well as the right, for a reasonable debate on immigration in Britain (Mulley 2010).

More reactions to Brown's *bigotgate* came from Glasgow, Scotland, with positive views about Brown's instincts, as an article in May 2010 revealed. The area was said to have developed into the most diversified city in Europe. Glasgow, in particular, has embraced Asians, Eastern Europeans, Italians and the Irish, though visitors from Blackburn, England, were dissatisfied with the changing nature of the area, blaming Labour for ignoring the region. It was claimed that the BNP would be their favourite in the election for showing concern about immigration in their manifesto. It was also reported that Scotland did not react to Brown's gaffe in the sense that their views on race were different from those across Britain. Scotland has been home to a constant influx of foreigners, including the Irish, following the Great Famine of the 1840s, and Italians on their way to America who changed their mind to have had a major impact on the Scottish catering. It has also been home to Indians, joined by Pakistanis, Chinese and Eastern Europeans, particularly Poles and Albanians, all of whom have strengthened the country's ability to provide vital services to the Scottish. Indeed, Eastern Europeans, as well as other immigrant groups, proved to be a substitute for the white Scots who were unable to take the jobs filled by the immigrant communities. From this perspective, Brown's apology was unnecessary in the sense that his reaction, an echo of that of Scots – diversity lovers – was based on his belief that God created all men and women equal (McKenna 2010).

Such a concern about immigration, the influx of Eastern Europeans in particular, was also reflected in opinion polls, providing evidence of media effects on shaping public opinion. For example, the May Issues Index, conducted between 7 and 13 May 2010, revealed that the economy was at a highest record,<sup>4</sup> with 71 per cent of voters seeing it as the first important issue facing Britain. The second issue was immigration, with 38 per cent, and the third was education/schools, with 23 per cent, closely followed by unemployment, with 22 per cent, and the fifth issue was crime, with 20 per cent. This marked a shift on the list of the top five issues, with increasing concern about the economy and immigration. The *bigotgate* event was very likely behind the increase in concern about immigration, following an extensive

---

4 A sample of 1,045 British adults aged 18+ were interviewed face-to-face at 181 sampling points across Britain.

coverage of the whole event in the British newspapers, including *The Guardian*. Such coverage was particularly focused on the event's repercussions on the election campaign and on Brown's political career.

Indeed, election results revealed that Labour candidate Simon Danczuk won Rochdale, with 36.4 per cent of the votes, but with – 4.5 per cent of the votes compared to the 2005 election. Conservative candidate Mudasir Dean had 34.4 per cent, with a 7.6 per cent swing compared to the 2005 election. The implication is that Labour was affected by the event in such a constituency. What should be pointed out is that Rochdale, a constituency in the North-West had a total electorate of 78,952 and a turnout of 58.1 per cent in the 2010 election. Although Labour secured the seat with Danczuk, their majority did not exceed 889, presumably due to the impact of the event on the intention of voters to change their mind about supporting the Labour Party. Labour also failed to secure their fourth term, thus leading to Brown's departure from 10 Downing Street.

### *Conclusion*

This paper explored the way media could shape public opinion during electoral campaigns, using the case of the 2010 British general election following Brown's *bigotgate*. The event seemed to have had a considerable impact on the Prime Minister's political career, as well as Labour's performance, as revealed in the election results. The *bigotgate* event seemed to have damaged Brown and contributed to his failure to secure a fourth victory for Labour. Indeed, the election saw Labour's share of the votes drop by 6.4 per cent; the Conservatives' share increased by 3.8 per cent; a 5.1 swing from Labour to the Conservatives, the second largest since 1945. Equally important, the event increased Britons' concern about mass migration and the influx of Eastern Europeans in particular, appearing as among the most important issues in the country. Concern about the influx with respect to its impact on Britain would later create more tensions, subsequently putting Britain's position within the EU at stake, thus leading to the split between the two partners.

### *Bibliography*

- A terrible gaffe – or a storm in a teacup? (2010). *The Guardian*, 30.04.2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/apr/30/gaffe-storm-in-a-teacup>; 5.11.2022].
- Bartle J., Avellaneda S., Stimson J. (2011). The Policy Mood and the Moving Centre. In: N. Allen, J. Bartle (eds.). *Britain at the Polls 2010* (pp. 147–174). London.
- Craig G. (2004). *The Media, Politics and Public Life*. Crows Nest, N.S.W.
- Curtis P. (2010). How Gillian Duffy nipped out for a loaf of bread – but left Gordon Brown in a right Jam. *The Guardian*, 29.04.2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/apr/29/gordon-brown-gillian-duffy-bigot>; 5.11.2022].
- Donsbach W., Traugott M.W. (2008). *The Sage Handbook of Public Opinion Research*. London.

- Entman R. (1989). How the Media Affect What People Think: An Information Processing Approach. *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 347–370.
- Greenslade R. (2010). Was it really wrong for Sky to broadcast Brown's bigot remarks? *The Guardian*, 4.05.2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2010/may/04/gordon-brown-general-election-2010>; 5.11.2022].
- Jones S. (2010). For Poles in Britain, 'bigot' rebuff to Gillian Duffy's immigrants anxiety strikes a raw nerve. *The Guardian*, 29.04.2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/apr/29/gordon-brown-gillian-duffy-bigot-immigration-poland>; 5.11.2022].
- McCombs M. (2004). *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion*. Cambridge.
- McKenna K. (2010). Gordon Brown can proudly hold his head high. *The Guardian*, 2.05.2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/may/02/gordon-brown-duffy-kevin-Mckenna>; 5.11.2022].
- Mulley S. (2010). Both left and right need to learn how to talk about immigration. *The Guardian*, 29.04.2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/29/immigration-left-right-labour-policy>].
- Morris S. (2010). Pensioners respond to Gordon Brown's bigot gaffe. *The Guardian*, 30.04.2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/apr/30/pensioners-gordon-brown-bigot-gaffe>; 5.11.2022].
- Orr D. (2010). 'Bigot' gaffe damages the Lib Dems, too. *The Guardian*, 28.04.2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/28/general-election-2010-gordon-brown1>; 5.11.2022].
- Popova M. (2010). My anger at Gillian Duffy and all the people who didn't stand up to her. *The Guardian*, 29.04.2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/29/gillian-duffy-eastern-european>].
- Siddique H. (2010). Unpublished YouGov/Sun poll shows support for Gordon Brown over 'bigot' Remark. *The Guardian*, 29.04.2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/apr/29/unpublished-sun-poll-brown-Bigot>; 5.11.2022].
- Travis A. (2010). Immigration amnesty was a modest plan. Electioneering has killed it. *The Guardian*, 30.04.2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/30/immigration-asylum-amnesty-election>; 5.11.2022].
- Wintour P., Curtis P. (2010). Gordon Brown 'penitent' after bigot gaffe torpedoed election Campaign. *The Guardian*, 28.04.2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/apr/28/gordon-brown-penitent-bigot-gaffe-campaign>; 5.11.2022].

