



HANSARD
SOCIETY

TELEVISED LEADERS' DEBATES REVISITED

UK 2001 - A Debate Odyssey

In retrospect, 1997 was probably the ideal moment for a televised leaders' debate to have been negotiated. The Prime Minister was in a weak position and needed to assert himself; all parties appeared to be interested in principle in participating; there was a public mood in favour of it taking place.

In the event, after protracted negotiations – in which the parties never once actually sat around a single table – the talks collapsed, followed by a period of mutual recriminations and embarrassing PR stunts involving actors dressed up as chickens. Why did the debate fail to materialise in 1997? Accounts have blamed both main parties for being disingenuous in their commitment to debate; while others have blamed the broadcasters for being too competitive and failing to agree a common proposal. (see Tait, Coleman, Mitchell)

In early 2001, the broadcasters collaborated in a commendable fashion in order to offer a common proposal to the party leaders. This had the advantage of being well thought out, although flexible enough to leave some room for negotiation over detail, and of being presented long enough in advance of the

expected election date to avoid consideration being swamped by the urgency of the campaign. In March 2000, the Hansard Society ran a seminar at Nuffield College in which representatives of the major parties and broadcasting organisations were present to think through some of the issues. That seminar ended with a hope that the broadcasters would produce a common proposal rather than each bid against the others for the parties' approval.

The proposal was for two one-hour debates, one on BBC and one on ITV, in the final fortnight of the campaign. Free feeds would be provided to other broadcasters wanting to show the debates. Formats for both debates would be identical, with David Dimbleby as moderator for the BBC debate and Jonathan Dimbleby for ITV. Each debate would be live and shown at peak-time on BBC1 and ITV.

The debates would include the three main UK party leaders, who would be invited to make brief opening and closing statements; the main substance of the debates would be three segments in which the party leaders would be able to cross-question one another on selected

areas of policy. The debates would take place before an invited audience selected on a balanced basis, but there would be no questions from the floor.

Within a short time, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat leaders expressed approval of the proposal and agreed in principle to participate. Early rumours from Number Ten suggested that the Prime Minister was also agreeable 'in principle' and that the proposal was being treated seriously. In the event, a statement from Alastair Campbell on 17 January declared that: 'We do not believe TV debates will significantly add to public interest in our understanding of the issues, indeed we fear the media focus on process not policy may lead the debates to have the opposite effect.' The Prime Minister's press secretary did not cite any research as a basis for this conclusion.

Repeating a reason given by John Major when he refused a TV debate in 1992, the Prime Minister stated that as the public sees the party leaders debating in the House of Commons every week, there was no need to run a special televised debate. This was a disingenuous argument: partly because PMQs, where one leader can only ask questions and the other can only state answers, is not a debate in the usual sense; and also because Labour has claimed to favour TV debates in the recent past.

The political reality is that popular incumbents, with commanding leads in the poll, are never going to make themselves vulnerable in a zero-sum conflict unless they cannot escape it.

Jonathan Dimbleby accused the Labour Party of throwing away 'a great opportunity to demonstrate that political leaders are not as contemptuous of the

voters as they are so frequently thought to be'. He argued that Number Ten's decision not only prevented the chance of 'an important democratic encounter', but 'has frustrated a chance to re-enthuse those disenchanted and alienated voters whose political apathy so unnerves our elected representatives' (*The Observer*, 21.1.01) The UK broadcasters will no doubt push again for a televised debate in the election after this one. Perhaps they should be assisted by the newly-established Electoral Commission which has a legislative remit to increase voter education and encourage greater public participation. Certainly, there is scope for the Commission to think about the value of debates from the perspective of civic education; this would add a new dimension to the current negotiating process.

Televised debates between leaders of the major parties are now customary in most democracies, including parliamentary systems (see main report for details). Why should the UK be different? In Scotland, where there are four main electoral parties, a leaders' debate was broadcast during the 1997 election campaign and during the 1999 election for the new Scottish Parliament three highly successful debates were run. BBC Scotland ran a *Question Time*-type format, chaired by Kirsty Wark; STV had an audience which interacted with the four leaders; and Channel 4 had a head-to-head between the leaders, with each being cross-examined by the others, presided over by Jon Snow. No research has been published on the effects of these debates upon voters, but press reports suggest that they served to educate the Scottish public about the main policy issues at stake. In interviews with two of the four participants in the 1999 debates we

found that the politicians involved found these useful occasions; that they prepared strenuously for them and were challenged by the formats adopted; that they would certainly participate in them in future; and that they recommended UK party leaders to do likewise.

Lessons from America

Televised leaders' debates have been run in the USA since 1960. By 1996, when Bill Clinton and Bob Dole participated in three debates, the traditional formats were becoming rather stale and audience ratings for these hitherto peak-viewing events were falling.

The 2000 US campaign began with a proposal from the Commission on Presidential Debates to run three 90-minute debates, shown simultaneously on all three major TV networks. The Bush team rejected this proposal, suggesting instead that there should be one formal-style debate, with two other more informal, conversational formats. The Gore team accused Bush of being scared to debate in the traditional fashion; Bush was perceived as a weak candidate in the primary televised debates, whereas Gore had scored well against Bill Bradley in the 1996 vice-presidential debates, even if he did have an image of being rather wooden. A heated 'debate over debates' occurred in which Bush was damaged by allegations of running scared. The Commission finally produced a compromise: three debates, but each with a different format so that both candidates could play to their strengths.

In the first debate, held on 3 October at the University of Massachusetts, the candidates stood behind podiums in the formal style. (This was the closest to the

proposed UK format for 2001.) The debate produced few moments of drama and was watched by only 32 million viewers - less than half the number who watched in 1960. The main story of the first debate emerged after it finished. The instant polls on the candidates' performances put Gore seven points ahead of Bush. Over the next few days, as soundbites and snapshot images were shown on news broadcasts, an emphasis was placed upon Gore's loud sighs and scoffing in response to Bush. This contributed to a reversal in the candidates' public ratings, with Bush seven points ahead of Gore in a CNN/USA Today poll four days after the first debate.

In the second debate, held at Wake Forest University, North Carolina on 11 October, the candidates sat at a table and discussed policies more informally. This was a new format for the US debate - more like a chat show than a trial. Bush's public congeniality contrasted with Gore's aloofness in this debate and there was a greater sense of the candidates thinking aloud as opposed to performing rehearsed recitations. Bush came out of this debate with a four-point poll lead.

The final debate repeated the 1992 Richmond Town Hall format, except that questions were selected in advance, diminishing the spontaneity of the event. Most polls regarded this debate as a tie between both candidates but, arguably, by then the damage had been done to Gore's reputation as the superior candidate who was the natural successor to Clinton.

The 2000 US debates demonstrated the dangers inherent in such contests to candidates who start out with poll

advantage, as well as to candidates lacking televisual skills. In what turned out to be one of the closest elections in US history, the debates may well have topped up support for Bush in a decisive fashion. Nonetheless, the 2000 debates showed a refreshing creativity on the part of the Commission in thinking about formats - as the media landscape continues to change this should be an ongoing process of finding better ways of putting the issues before the public.

Bring on the citizens

To the extent that 2000 was 'the first internet election' in the US, and 2001 will be in the UK, how far might we expect new forms of election debate to emerge? In the US, the internet produced two interesting debate-related developments:

- The first innovation was the rise of the 'e-butttal' - within seconds of claims being made by the presidential candidates in the TV debates, the rival parties were in a position to issue online rebuttals. The Bush campaign's debatefacts.com site reloaded every 80 seconds during the TV debates and provided between 20 and 35 instant rebuttals per debate. This was an ingenious use of the internet as an inexpensive and immediate follow-up to another medium.
- One of the most promising online initiatives of the election was the Markle Foundation's Web White & Blue web site (webwhiteblue.com), which ran its own cyber-debate between 1 October and election day. This described itself as 'the first online presidential debate in our history' featuring 'daily exchanges

among the presidential campaigns and responses to questions submitted by internet users. The exchanges have two parts: a *Message of the Day* from the campaign and a response to a *Question of the Day* submitted by an internet user. Responses can take any form (video, audio, text, or links to a candidate's web site), and are not limited in length. Each campaign is permitted a rebuttal to their opponent's message of the day and question of the day responses.' Disappointingly, this site did not provide a forum for citizen-to-citizen discussion, but even without this it demonstrated something of how electoral debate could become more inclusive and interactive in the age of the internet.

The 2001 UK election will witness several new opportunities for members of the public to question and challenge the candidates. The extent to which a real 'voters' debate' takes place will be assessed in a forthcoming Hansard Society report. Between then and 2005/6 there should be scope for planning a more interactive televised leaders' debate, combining elements of television and online media. By 2010, digital TV should be with us, presenting new opportunities to bring the election debate directly into people's living rooms - and back again.

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References: Coleman, S; Mitchell, A; Tait, R