TELEVISIONED LEADERS’ DEBATES

An evaluation and a proposal

Dr Stephen Coleman
The Author

Dr Stephen Coleman is a member of the LSE Media Research Group and contributes to the Media and Communications MSc at the London School of Economics and Political Science, specialising in the relationship between citizenship and the media, and the democratic functions of media interactivity. He has written several books and articles, the most recently published being Stilled Tongues: From Soapbox to Soundbite. He is Director of the Hansard Scholars Programme.

King-Hall Papers

King-Hall Papers are named after the founder of the Hansard Society, Stephen King-Hall, who was its first Chairman from 1944 to 1964, and first Director from 1944 to 1957. Without his vision and energy the Society, with its object of promoting knowledge of and interest in Parliamentary Government, would never have existed. King-Hall Papers are a series of occasional papers which are published as a contribution to the continuous debate about the efficacy of Parliamentary Government, and how it can be maintained for the present and developed for the future. The views expressed are those of the author, and the Society, as an independent non-party foundation, is neither for nor against. The Society is, however, happy to publish these views and to invite analysis and discussion of them.
TELEVISED LEADERS’ DEBATES

An evaluation and a proposal

by

Dr Stephen Coleman

March 1997

The Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government
St Philips Building North, Sheffield Street, London WC2A 2EX
Foreword
by Dr David Butler,
Chairman, The Hansard Society

This paper is going to press at a time when
the 1997 General Election is only a matter of
a few weeks away. It is therefore highly topical,
covering as it does a subject of such obvious
immediacy.

The broadcast media will undoubtedly have
a major role in the coming campaign. One can
discuss the rights and wrongs of that, and
whether it is good or bad that there is now less
political activity at constituency level, but one
cannot deny the fact of it. In that context it is
highly appropriate that there should be an
analysis of televised leaders' debates, so
Stephen Coleman has done a service to the
democratic process by producing this wide-
ranging study.

As with all its publications of this kind, the
Hansard Society, as a non-party foundation, is
neither for nor against the recommendations,
but we can wholeheartedly commend Dr
Coleman's paper as a major contribution
to debate. It should be required reading by
both spin doctors and patients, and by the
broadcasting authorities.

The Society is an educational charity which
can only publish studies of this kind with the
help of generous friends. On this occasion,
and not for the first time in the short life of
King-Hall papers, we are grateful to the Joseph
Rowntree Charitable Trust for their support.
TELEVISION
LEADERS' DEBATES
An evaluation and a proposal

Introduction
These days there are real issues that need to be debated in depth. The British electorate is probably the most mature in the world. It can take sensible, detailed argument even when it's uncomfortable. Now, we should be engaged in sensible argument. I'm not interested in trivial soundbite debates. I'm interested in getting at the substance of real issues that matter to the people of this country. That doesn't involve just a simple, trivial televised spectacular. It involves something more comprehensive than that. I'm going to ensure, as we come into the election, in a range of ways, that we have a proper, significant, detailed debate on the issues. – John Major, Leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister, on the Today programme, BBC Radio Four, 18 September, 1996.

Let us ... elevate the campaign and debate the issues seriously. I hear on the grapevine that Mr Major's circle are divided on the question of a head to head debate with Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown. I hope he will overrule the fainthearts and go for it. It would be a tremendous focus for the election, it would capture the public's imagination and show that politics isn't just about throwing mud. I take this opportunity, today, to ask the broadcasting organisations to start looking at how such a debate might be organised: the venue, the ground rules, the broadcast pooling arrangements and the audience. If we get a 'yes' from Number Ten we should be ready to move. – Speech by Peter Mandelson MP, Labour's General Election campaign manager, to the Westminster Media Forum, 19 November, 1996.

We believe that a debate between the party leaders on TV could be an enhancement of democracy and valuable in bridging the gap between the voters on the one hand and the parties and politicians who seek their votes on the other. The key determinant of whether such a debate enhances democratic participation will be the ability of voters to ask questions of all party leaders directly. – Statement on Leaders' TV Debates in the Election from Lord Holme, Chairman of the Liberal Democrat Election Team.

On the face of it, all three main parties are in favour of engaging in debate with one another. The Prime Minister, conscious of his image as the chap on the soapbox with a reasonable message to impart, declares the need for deep, substantial analysis, refusing to sacrifice policy detail for the sake of audience comfort and eschewing soundbite trivia in the face of a mature electorate.

Peter Mandelson, the ubiquitous communicator of New Labour, calls for similarly lofty principles of political combat, with serious debate replacing mud-slinging and a televised contest involving all three main party leaders serving to inject much-needed imaginative focus into the sterile and alienating slog of contemporary election campaigning rituals. As a third party with much to gain from the conspicuous co-presence of its leader upon a Prime Ministerial audition stage, the Liberal Democrats advocate not merely a publicity opportunity for the third-party leader, but the creation of a genuine forum, involving direct questioning by the audience, as a means to diminish the chasm which has tended to separate the political elite from the voting majority.

Observers of these lucid, passionate pleas in favour of an election process invigorated by the deliberative and democratic force of reasoned debate can only delight in such forthright intentions. Candidates for political leadership appear to be responding, seemingly with one voice, to what most people who cherish democracy have long been saying: Do not insult us with relentless, vacuous slogans and vicious, negative imagery; lift the electoral debate from the glib messages of the ad-agencies to the higher reaches of a mature, deliberating electorate which can and will arrive at reasoned judgements if public discourse will only abandon the cynical neglect of reason. Let us see you argue before us as if we matter, people are saying, and let us argue with you as if we are more than extras in a cinema spectacular. Democracy calls for nothing less.

So, why the difficulty in organising a televised leaders' debate? Why, after all the appeals for real debate, can the electorate still not be confident of a serious, democratic debate involving the main party leaders actually taking place on the most obvious national forum: television? The Prime Minister has declared his willingness to enter into direct confrontation in a debate with the Leader of the Opposition, but the Conservative Party rejects the case for the inclusion of the third-party leader; the Liberal Democrats have threatened to take legal action against the broadcasters if their leader is excluded. Allegations of cynicism and disingenuity abound. Might the Conservatives, with an incumbent leader who has much to lose by offering his opponents the dignity of sharing a platform with him, be merely creating the appearance of favouring a televised debate while knowing very well that their stipulations must render it impractical? Could it be said of Labour's communications chiefs that they are happier to throw out challenges to debate than to risk their robust poll lead by putting their man in the ring and allowing him to slip or be tripped? Do the Liberal Democrats protest too much that their leader must be allowed to present himself as a real choice as future
Prime Minister? No party is going to admit to presenting any obstacles to debate, and too easily the broadcasters can be blamed for not pushing hard enough or negotiating well enough to facilitate the debate which all parties seem to want.

A starting assumption of this paper is that the quotations at its head ought not to be dismissed automatically as mere rhetorical posturing. Let us assume that the stated intentions are real and that practical solutions can be found to ensure that the first-ever televised leaders’ debate in Britain will take place, will be judiciously impartial, and will serve the democratic process. How can the commitment to debate be transformed from words to deeds? What are the criteria for serious, meaningful and substantial public debate between leaders of parties in a representative democracy? What form should debates take? What are the lessons from comparable political situations where they have taken place? Whether it happens in this election or the one after it, what should the public expect and demand from party leaders when they face one another, and more importantly face the voters in their millions, to debate their fitness to govern? To offer answers to these questions, and to generate wider discussion leading to better answers, and perhaps different questions, is the purpose of this paper.

The context: elections in a media democracy

The general election of 1959 occasioned the most significant change in the conduct of electioneering since the advent of ‘mass politics’ in 1884, when most men obtained the vote, and 1928, when the same right was granted to most women. 1959 was the year of the UK’s first ‘television election’. The significance of the change was recognised as it happened, both by disgruntled print journalists who realised the consequent diminished influence of their own editorialising commentaries and by more impartial political commentators who were in little doubt that electoral politics after 1959 would never be the same again.

Unlike earlier profound changes to the form and style of British electioneering, no statutory alteration to the constitution was the cause. The first reason for the televising of British electoral politics was the rapid growth in access to television sets. In 1955, at the time of the fourth general election after the Second World War, less than four people in ten in Britain had regular access to TV sets; by the time of the next general election three-quarters of British voters had access to a TV set. No other technological change has ever affected so dramatically and radically the course of British politics. The second cause of ‘the television election’ was the creation, by the Television Act of 1954, of the Independent Television Authority (ITA) as an independent/commercial competitor to the BBC. Prior to the establishment of ITA/TV the BBC enjoyed what was, to say the least, a cosy relationship with the political establishment. More accurately, one might say that political leaders possessed powers of constraint upon BBC political broadcasting which were antagonistic to open and democratic media reporting and public discussion.

In 1944 the BBC had accepted voluntarily a convention which became known as the 14-day Rule, according to which it was not allowed to broadcast any talks, discussions or debates on matters scheduled for parliamentary deliberation for two weeks before such issues were to be debated in Parliament; neither were MPs permitted to participate in broadcast discussions concerning any pending legislation. These constraints were embodied in a formal directive from the Postmaster General, given with the assent of Parliament, in July 1955. Enforced in accordance with Clause 15(4) of the BBC’s Licence and Agreement, the same regulation was imposed upon the Independent Television Authority when it was established in 1954. Equally anomalously, since 1939 the BBC’s policy was to have no coverage, either in the form of reports or discussion, relating to an election during the official three-week period of the campaign. The only programming related to the election campaign comprised Party Political Broadcasts, the contents of which were totally under the control of the party leaderships.

A forthright breach of both the 14-day Rule and the BBC’s practice of not covering elections occurred in 1958 when ITV defied convention, and the majority view in Parliament, and reported the Rochdale by-election campaign. This opened the floodgates for full ITV coverage of the next general election, in 1959, leaving the BBC with no option but to do likewise or be left on the political sidelines. The format and style of the 1959 election coverage set a pattern which was not to change radically for at least the next three decades: the BBC’s main election presenter was Richard Dimbleby, to be succeeded latterly by the next Dimbleby generation as well as other household names including Peter Snow, Jeremy Paxman and a host of academic commentators; ITV sought to generate its own less deferential, more spontaneous and confrontational style, appointing Robin Day as one of their earliest principal election presenters. Granada TV, covering the English north-west region for ITV in 1959, took its coverage a stage further beyond the remoteness of staid studio presentation and expert commentary by running an audience-participation hustings-style debate between candidates which was watched by at least 22% of the region’s viewers. Here was an example of the so-called Town Meeting style of TV discussion, sometimes mistakenly regarded as an innovation of the 1990s’ US talk-show generation, making an impressively invigorating impact at the very outset of British televised election broadcasting. If anything, in the apparently more daring period of post-Sixties television, there has, with only a few honourable exceptions, been a lack of courage to repeat such exercises in live and relatively unmediated election discussion.

The pre-1959 constraints upon election broadcasting greatly benefited the leaderships of the main vote-winning parties. The caricatured account of politicians abjectly surrendering to the might of the television image is largely a myth of the politicians’ own creation. In fact, politicians have been far from captives of broadcast politics: both long before 1959, when Stanley Baldwin used radio to his advantage, and after, when both
Macmillan and Wilson proved magisterial in their manipulation of TV imagery, the party machines have enjoyed a parasitical relationship with the TV communicators. Cries of despair by politicians claiming to be at the mercy of the broadcasters, ranging from Crossman in the Sixties to Heseltine in the Nineties, convey a distinct disingenuity; and sometimes a paternalistic nostalgia, for the days when party chiefs decided what would be broadcast during elections and who would do the broadcasting. Equally, the complaints of TV journalists against stage-managed campaigns, which have reached a crescendo not only in Britain but elsewhere in recent years, tend more often than not to be objections to their own exclusion from the role of stage managers rather than the process of stage management itself. The symbiotic relationship between parties and programme-makers has been well exposed by the BBC's Nicholas Jones, and analysed systematically by Blunier and Gurevitch. From the perspective of generating more robust democratic politics, it is the act of stage management which is the main problem, regardless of whether network production teams or party spin doctors control the stage.

The factor without which democratic election broadcasting cannot be advanced is the audience/the voters. Unless these people are stimulated sufficiently by televised election broadcasting to think, participate and vote (or to not vote, consciously) there is no reason to suggest that 'television elections' equal more democratic elections. Assessments of British election broadcasting have been mixed. Media theorists and commentators are on the whole dissatisfied with the current framework of election programming, but this assessment arises more often than not from standards set by democratic theory or assumptions about the best possible forms of public deliberation. From such a perspective there is a remarkable degree of agreement about the unsatisfactory nature of British election broadcasting as a means of enhancing the democratic process. Kavanagh has, accordingly, argued that 'Television has had the effect in the US, and to a lesser extent in the UK, of providing campaigners with fewer and fewer opportunities via the media to elaborate reasoned arguments, discuss complex problems or develop anything but rather simple ideas. The speech has given way to the soundbite and both are giving way to the photo-opportunity.' Franklin observes that 'Media democracy, with its packaged politics, is characterized by an absence of direct political debate; voters have become spectators rather than participants in debate.' Blunier and Gurevitch, who have been analysing election broadcasting since 1964, perceive what they call a 'crisis of public communication' and conclude their recent book of that title by asserting that 'the political communication process now tends to strain against, rather than with, the grain of citizenship. While politicians often behave as if planting ever more clever messages in the media could be a miracle cure for their power predicaments, journalists often employ disdain, scorn and shock-horror exposure as ripostes to their threatened autonomy. Meanwhile, the voter is left gasping for "civically nourishing" air - not expecting to be given it and surprised when it is given. Our civic arteries are hardening.'

The term 'media democracy' is now widely used, to suggest a diminution of active citizenship and an appropriation of the sphere of democratic public discussion by an elite of professional communicators. Opponents of the critical consensus suggest that it is based upon idealistic expectations for mass debate in complex political societies. Echoing Lippsmann, they doubt the capacity of mass media audiences to grasp the complexities of serious policy debate and seem content that majority participation in elections remains confined to voting rather than deliberating.

The general public, to whose aid democratic theorists think they are coming, tend to regard TV election coverage as being both satisfactory and trustworthy. In 1992 78% of the electorate polled regarded BBC and ITV election coverage as being unbiased and truthful.* The main complaints in polls on this question concerned there being too much election coverage and it being disruptive to routine TV scheduling. But perhaps the British public's relative complacency on this issue arises largely as a result of contrasting regulated TV broadcasting with the unregulated, highly unbalanced press; and perhaps boredom with election coverage can be interpreted not merely as evidence of democratic inertia, but as a reaction against the stage management of politics.

As for the parties and the politicians, they tend to favour TV election coverage, while giving occasional voice to predictable complaints about bias towards their opponents or against themselves, and protesting rather disingenuously that TV producers have stolen the campaign away from them. British TV producers have of late engaged in some critical introspection of their own standards, routines and limitations; this is surely not unrelated to the increasing reality of public estrangement from election broadcasting (especially during the 1992 campaign) and a sense that covering elections should be less exclusively about what the politicians are promising and more emphatically about how to help the general public to arrive at well-deliberated, responsible political judgements.

The origins of, and arguments for, televised leaders' debates

A year after the UK's first TV election the United States had its first televised presidential debate, in its way as much an innovation in electioneering as TV coverage of the campaign had been in the UK. The USA had had televised presidential campaign coverage since 1952, and televised presidential press conferences, though never live before Kennedy recognised their value in the 1960s, had at least accustomed US voters to the sight of the holder of the highest political office being open to public interrogation by journalists.

Before turning to the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debate and its history, the danger of making comparative analyses between US presidential debates and a putative UK debate between party leaders must be recognised. Quite clearly, the constitutional role of a US President as the head of the Executive is very different from the role of a
British party leader who, at least in constitutional theory, is standing in the election as one candidate for a single constituency with a view to leading his or her party in Parliament and becoming Prime Minister if that party is able to command a voting majority in the House of Commons. In political reality leaders of the main parties are candidates for the role of Prime Minister, will be judged upon their merits as potential leaders of a parliamentary majority and captains of government, and should be evaluated in terms of their personal and political strengths and weaknesses as national and international statesmen.

That granted, the role of UK Prime Minister, because of its intimate and inseparable relationship to party and Parliament, should not be confused with the role of the US President. The latter may never have had any federal experience before seeking the highest office (as was the case with the present incumbent, a previous state governor, and also with ex-President Reagan, whose only experience had been in Californian state politics) and has an identification with the party machine which is far less solid than that of British party leaders. The personal powers of a US President are constitutionally much greater than those of a British Prime Minister. The emphasis upon scrutiny of character and identification of policies in the case of electing the former is not comparatively applicable to the latter. So, despite the fact that political similarities between the two leadership roles are indeed greater than constitutional theory would suggest, the fact is that it would be quite wrong to determine the case for televised leaders' debates in the UK on the basis of US debate experience. That is why the temptation has been resisted to examine the case for British debates in terms of comparisons with US presidential debates, preferring instead to use more appropriate comparative precedents taken from countries with parliamentary as opposed to presidential electoral systems.

The value of the US debates lies not in any direct comparability, but the immense literature relating to debate formats and impacts which has come out of the United States. To ignore such well-researched and longstanding data in examining the best form which a British televised leaders' debate would take would be to dismiss some of the most detailed academic analyses of televised debates. It is in this sense that it is useful to refer to the abundant US literature. Furthermore, for reasons rooted in political culture and history, the USA has an admirable and unique record of taking political debates seriously. Whereas Britain has tended to confine the art of debating to rather exclusive institutions which have traditionally rewarded rhetorical superficiality and juvenile huffiness at least as much as cogent argumentation, and has tended to either sneer at or ignore its rich tradition of street-corner and parish-pump oratory, the USA has taken debating much more seriously. The popularity of New England town meetings, the lyceum movement, the highly successful America's Town Meeting of the Air, and now mass media talk shows, are indicative of the high premium placed by Americans upon good talk and convincing argument. In July 1960 the two main-party candidates for the US presidency responded positively, within two days of one another, to an invitation from the three major TV networks to participate in one or more televised debates. After protracted negotiations, it was agreed to hold a series of four debates, two involving a single chairperson (moderator) and two involving a panel of journalists, to be approved by both candidates. Ironically, the decision to have the candidates questioned by a panel, which turned the event into something resembling a joint press conference than a real debate, was on the insistence of the candidates rather than the broadcasters; the latter argued for a much more direct, head-to-head debate format. It might be imagined that candidates in televised political debates would prefer formats allowing them to make their own speeches and engage in direct exchanges with their opponent(s) than be subjected to 'hardball' direct questioning from expert journalists. The evidence, not only from the USA but elsewhere, does not bear this out. Candidates seem to feel on safer ground in the press-conference style of debate. The shared political culture between political leaders and established journalists makes for a degree of predictability of questioning, and offers security as to the conventional borders between relevant and irrelevant political discourse.

Most candidates are more at home and therefore happiest with a format in which known journalists prod them into answering or evading questions. As will be suggested, such comfort at the centre of the debating stage may be in inverse proportion to the satisfaction of audiences with the 'press conference' format. In the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates, the first of which is now notorious for the negative impact created by Nixon's televi sional image and the telegenic success of Kennedy, whose campaign went from strength to strength as a direct result of the exposure he enjoyed as the perceived debate 'winner', the role of the interviewing panel was not popular. In the one study conducted after the 1960 debates which sought responses from the general public on format improvement the view that 'The interviewing newsmen should be eliminated' was persistently stated.12

Televised presidential debates have been held in 1960 and every time since 1976 and, with notable exceptions in the two most recent series of debates, the press-conference format has been retained. This has led some critics of such televised events to question their authenticity, labelling them as 'counterfeit debates' 'pseudo-events', or 'joint press conferences'.13 Whether or not one endorses these criticisms, it should be noted that televised debates did not of necessity have to take this form and that this format can be criticised, or even regarded as a non-debate, without diminishing the case for televised debates. There is a danger of confusing the case for or against a particular debating format with the case for against having televised debates as such. Indeed, even in the USA the history of broadcast debates before 1960 involved much more imaginative formats than those employed in subsequent Presidential debates. The Stassen-Dewey debate in May 1948 for the Republican primary nomination, the first to be broadcast on radio, involved a head-to-head conflict of views with a single topic on the agenda: whether or not to outlaw the US
Communist Party. (Dewey opposed the ban and ‘lost’ the debate.)

In May 1956 the first-ever televised election debate, between Democratic primary candidates Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver, involved no panel of questioning journalists, leaving the candidates much freer to expound their own policies and directly question one another. Other candidates, precluding what is mistakenly regarded as a recent trend in audience participation, went boldly into the studios and fielded live questions from audience members: both (John) Dewey and Prescott Bush (father of George Bush) showed Clintonesque skills in this medium as early as 1950, and in 1960 Hubert Humphrey campaigned by taking live calls from viewers on TV.

The debate about debate formats (or whether indeed the ‘debates’ are debates) is extensive and has been rehearsed with good reason in relation to some of the debate formats examined below. Before seeking a format which serves the objective of a democratically valuable televised debate, one needs to define the criteria determining democratic value. The research data arising from US and other countries’ leaders’ debates suggests four main arguments in support of their democratic value as a form of political communication:-

1. Televised debates are the best way of reaching a sizeable audience, including those within the electorate who tend to pay less attention to other forms of political discussion or publicity. In almost every country where they have been broadcast debates have attracted record ratings for political programming, including many viewers for whom they are the only source of media information about the election. 12

2. The debates have a valuable educational impact. An impressive body of data indicates that voters know more about candidates and are stimulated to seek more information for themselves about party policies if they watch televised debates than if they do not.

3. The debates equalise access to the mass media audience. Televised debates create a so-called level playing field, at least for some brief moments of prime media time, putting incumbents on the same platform as rivals lacking the dignity of high office; providing a free means of publicity for parties unable to compete with their rivals in the purchase of paid political advertising; and giving those behind in the opinion polls a chance to redress their fortunes by addressing ‘public opinion’ in one crucially-important event.

4. The debates enable voters who would not normally have close-up access to candidates for high office to scrutinise their personalities, to see how they respond when put under pressure and to evaluate them as if they were considering them as applicants for a job – which, in effect, they are. In turn, in order to impress the evaluating home audience, candidates have to spend much time before debates clarifying and studying the implications of their policies and, if they are sensible, becoming aware of their rivals’ policies and thinking seriously of why voters should reject them. (This might be one of the only times in their lives that politicians have to reflect dialectically upon the case for their outlook as opposed to another.)

These arguments in favour of televised leaders’ debates all possess strong merits and should inform a decision as to whether they will be good for British electoral democracy. (Clearly, this is a different and more civically significant decision from that of whether televised debates will be beneficial to the party leaders who must consent to participate in them if they are to take place. It is important that these two issues are not confused.)

In assessing the necessary features which a UK televised debate would need to have for it to be of democratic value we might utilise a series of questions posed in response to US presidential debates by Professor Diana Carlin.

Why do people watch the debates?
What do viewers learn from debates?
How do debate formats affect learning?
Are debate formats more or less useful than other campaign information sources in providing voter education?
Is the public’s agenda served by the debates?

Such questioning, pursued by Carlin with the help of extensive focus group studies of the 1992 presidential election debates, helped shift the focus of assessing the value of debates away from the psychologial calculations of politicians and the broadcasters’ primary interest in ‘good TV’ (which is usually equated with high audience ratings) and towards the democratic needs of the audience/electorate. 13 This shift is appropriate in determining the case for televised debates on the basis of their democratic value. Unless voters can expect televised debates to provide them with measurable democratic gains of the kind outlined by Carlin, it would be wrong to promote such events in the name of extending democracy. Providing a mass audience for politicians or boosting ratings for election campaign broadcasting do not in themselves constitute an extension of democracy.

Four broad criteria by which the democratic gains of the viewing/voting audience can be judged are:-

1. The fairness of the proposed format. No party leader who can reasonably expect to win enough votes to become Prime Minister should be excluded from participating. No party should be allowed to insist upon a format which would benefit its candidate or limit the opportunities of its opponents. No party leaders should be included as lesser participants, even though some will obviously be leading parties likely to win fewer votes or seats than their rivals’ parties, or will be lagging in the opinion polls: once included as prospective leaders of government, participation must be upon a level playing field. The facilitating and chairing of the debates must be scrupulously impartial and conducted with a view to the long-term interests of public democratic deliberation rather than any short-term interests of programme scheduling or campaign strategies. Given a conflict between the need for the most scrupulous attention to fair format and the threat of any party leader not participating except on their own terms, the latter must be sacrificed for the sake of the former in all circumstances.

2. The legal acceptability of the debate format. As there have been no televised leaders’ debates in the UK, there exists neither law nor broadcasting regulations
governing them. Electoral law which does exist would not impinge upon the participation of party leaders in a national televised debate: clearly, they will not be debating as candidates for specific constituencies, and would be forbidden to use the debates in any way to advance their constituency campaigns, so the terms of the Representation of the People Act would not be applicable. The law has no role in evaluating which parties' leaders have sufficient reason to expect to become Prime Minister or play a key role in government after the election. So, the judgement about inclusion in the debate must be made independently of the courts. Rather than the question of inclusion being determined through backroom negotiations between broadcasters and politicians, a more respectable determination of this issue would best be left to a formally neutral body: ideally, an independent electoral commission. In the absence of such a much-needed commission, the regulation of the debate should be supervised by an independent organisation. Broadcasters should continue to be bound by their licences to behave with the strictest impartiality, although this need not result in debates being constrained by a stopwatch conception of balance.

3. The likelihood of the debate stimulating genuine communication, real political education and information, and a desire by viewers to participate in the electoral discussion. This is a tall order, but an essential one. At the very least one would hope that televised leaders' debates would prompt more people to use their votes positively and, in the long-run, the objective of the event should be to raise the level of public education, deliberation and participation in tangible and measurable ways. In short, while such debates will undoubtedly be measured first and foremost in terms of their impact upon voting intentions (which have been of only modest significance in other countries), they must be justified in terms of a more enduring civic impact upon the generation of authentic political discourse, wider public participation in the political process, and the creation of a more curious and deliberative public.

4. The need to keep debates as free as possible from organised news management. Both the voting and non-voting public has become increasingly more cynical towards election stunts and forms of political spinning which pay little attention to candour. A great advantage of a televised debate is that it would be live and transparent. It would be naively idealistic to propose that parties should not seek to give their own spin on debates after they have happened, but the events themselves should be so structured as to prevent spin doctors from transforming them from genuine expositions of and dialogues about ideas and policies into theatrical performances. Debate formats should be adopted which inhibit opportunities for participants to contribute rehearsed recitations or sloganised negative assaults on their opponents.

Not just one or most but all of the above four criteria need to be met before televised leaders' debates can be justified in terms of their democratic value.

The UK is now an exception to the leading constitutional democracies in not televising leaders' debates during the election campaign period. Other countries have clearly recognised that television, as the most visible, popular public stage in contemporary society, is the obvious setting for the key battle between contenders for state power to be played out.

In the United States debates began in 1960 as a result of the initiative of the national network broadcasters, but the legal terms of the 1934 Communications Act (Section 315 of which was set aside by a special Act of Congress in 1960 as a means of excluding participation by minority candidates for the presidency) resulted in sufficient legal controversy to make it impossible for broadcasters simply to ignore it. The equal-time principle embodied in the 1934 Act was strategically ignored in 1976 and subsequent debates by having them organised by the Education Fund of the League of Women Voters. This allowed the broadcasters to claim that they were merely broadcasting a public meeting run by an independent educational body, and therefore the terms of the Act were inapplicable. The 1984 debates organised by the League of Women Voters were criticised by both main US parties and this led to a decision to establish an independent Commission on Presidential Debates, including senior members of both parties as well as non-partisan organisers. The Commission's first attempt to organise a series of televised debates, in 1992, was only partly successful, due to the refusal of party strategists to agree with the debate formats laid down by the Commission. In 1996 the Commission was rather more successful in imposing its authority over the debates. In Canada debate organisations has remained a matter for negotiation between broadcasters and politicians. (These debates are assessed below.)

In Australia (also examined below) and New Zealand televised leaders' debates have been held since 1984. In New Zealand the debates have been organised by the broadcasters (chiefly TVNZ, with TV3 showing its debate to a much smaller audience). Prior to the 1996 election, held for the first time on the basis of a proportional representation system, only the major parties participated in the TVNZ debates. In the 1996 debates there were two innovations: a studio audience, balanced on party lines, was present in the studio, and pre-selected audience members were invited to put questions to the candidates; and, in the second and final TVNZ debate, leaders of three minor parties considered to have a chance of breaking the threshold for representation under the new voting system were invited to participate. A major source of criticism of the New Zealand leaders' debates, as of the Australian ones, has been the on-screen presence of a graph reflecting audience perceptions of the candidates' comments. As we shall show, this has had a deleterious effect upon the democratic value and seriousness of the Australian debates since 1993, and in New Zealand has led one eminent political columnist to ask "Why has a television quiz show been billed as a leaders' debate?".

France has had televised debates since 1974, involving only the two presidential candidates remaining prior to the second election ballot. The French debates were organised originally by a legally-established body, the Commission nationale de la communication et des
libertés (CNCL). This body was replaced in 1989 by the Conseil supérieur de l'audience (CSA) which is bound by law to give equal time in televised debates to all candidates; hence the decision only to broadcast election debates after the first round of the election has been held, and only two contenders remain. French leaders' debates have never adopted the US format of having politicians questioned by journalists, but have relied upon policy expositions by and direct exchanges between candidates. This format worked greatly to the advantage of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in his 1974 and 1981 debates against Francois Mitterrand. The fear that the absence of mediation by journalists could make debates unappealing to or above the heads of viewers does not appear to have been relevant in France where as many as 24 out of 29 million voters watch the debates, the excitement of which are intensified by their closeness to the final election day.

In Germany leaders' debates have been broadcast since 1969, on the Thursday before the Sunday election. They are organised by the major television networks (ARD and ZDF) and only leaders of parties represented in the Bundestag are invited to participate. The German debates have tended to involve several parties, and have explicitly rejected the French model on the grounds that debates in a parliamentary democracy should reflect party plurality rather than the personalities of the most prominent leaders. The possible negative consequence of this approach has been the diminishing audience for German leaders' debates (from 84% in 1972 to less than 50% of the eligible voters in 1987). This fall in audience ratings may reflect other trends in German media (such as the spread of cable channels which do not show the debates), but is probably also due to the length of the debates (three hours, on average) and the number of participants from minor parties. Nonetheless, the debates are taken extremely seriously by party strategists, not least because of research indicating that candidates perceived to have 'won' the TV debate can expect this to be reflected in votes cast in the election three days later. Since unification in 1990 party leaders have failed to agree to a debate format, with Chancellor Kohl refusing initially to participate in a debate with the PDS.

In Holland there have been televised leaders' debates since 1977. The Dutch electoral system encourages a multiplicity of parties and the organisation of the media is highly politicised, with viewers' organisations reflecting different religious and political strands. This has resulted in a tradition of having two debates: one involving the main parties with a real chance of forming the government, and a second round-table debate involving most of the smaller parties.

Sweden has been broadcasting leaders' debates since even before the United States, although even more than the US events these are essentially joint press conferences in which the party leaders are questioned two days before the election by two journalists. This leaves little opportunity for direct confrontation between the candidates and therefore hardly qualifies as a debate. Denmark holds a similar televised event the day before the election, although the second part of the three-hour event permits candidates to speak for themselves, without journalistic intervention. Norwegian debates are held in front of a panel of journalists and, more recently, in the presence of a selected audience of voters who question the leaders. As in the United States in 1992 and 1996, such audience participation has been perceived to enliven the debates.

The custom of broadcasting leaders' debates has spread globally in the 1990s and has become a hallmark of democratic cultures. South Africa broadcast a party leaders' debate in the run-up to its first democratic election in 1994. With the creation of a new electoral system in Israel in 1996, in which for the first time direct voting for the office of Prime Minister took place, Israel TV broadcast its first leaders' debate. (The performance of Netanyahu in this event has been widely credited with ensuring his narrow victory over Peres.) Both of these debates adopted formats used previously in other countries.

From this brief account of the history of televised leaders' debates it is clear that there are several formats which could be adopted for British debates. Of those studied, the federal debates broadcast in Australia since 1984 and Canada since 1968 offer the best comparative models which should inform the organisation of televised debates in Britain. These countries have constitutional systems which are closer to the United Kingdom than others which have been considered above, and their experience of broadcasting debates offers substantial lessons, both positive and negative, which British debate broadcasters would do well to consider. In examining the Australian and Canadian debates, video recordings of past debates have been watched; producers and presenters of these debates have been interviewed; analyses by academic commentators as well as journalists have been studied; and post-debate polls have been scrutinised. The examination of these debates (of which only the major findings are reported here for the sake of brevity and clarity) casts light on questions relating to the most appropriate debate format and their discernible impact upon the democratic process.

The Australian debates

What has sometimes been called 'the tyranny of distance' has made national political campaigning in a federal state as large as Australia rather difficult. Ever since leaders' 'policy speeches' have been broadcast, radio, and later television, have been a principal means of parties reaching the widely dispersed electorate. Local party activists have been reluctant to accept centralised campaigns and the abandonment of local meetings and leafletting, but since the Labor revival of the late 1960s, and particularly the Whitlam-led 1972 ALP federal election campaign, there has been an increased dependence upon US-style political marketing and the use of television as a means of electoral agenda-setting. Although Bob Hawke is usually credited with initiating the first televised leaders' debate in Australian political history, this is only partly true. In fact, the first televised leaders' confrontation was screened during a brief encounter between Gough Whitlam and the Liberal leader, Billy Snedden; both men were addressing an
audience of elderly Italians and offered their pre-1972 election speeches in fluent Italian! Apart from this curiosity of broadcasting history, there had been several radio and television debates in state elections before the first televised leaders' debate in a federal election in 1984.

The 1984 debate was organised by the Canberra Press Club and involved Prime Minister Bob Hawke and Opposition leader Andrew Peacock, being questioned by a panel of senior parliamentary gallery journalists before a live audience. The debate was made available to all Australian television stations and was broadcast live by the ABC. Hawke, who entered the debate as the most popular candidate, as well as the incumbent with more to lose than his opponent, took a risk in agreeing to debate on television, but had little political choice after having publicly taunted the previous Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, in a series of 1983 TV ads, for refusing to debate the issues on television. Hawke was perceived by journalists and immediate post-debate polls to have lost the debate, not so much because his performance was weak — the contestants were generally regarded as evenly-matched — but because Peacock came across as a reasonably strong and credible candidate, thus undermining Hawke’s advantage as incumbent. When Hawke was questioned on an allegation of government phone-tapping of a journalist, his capacity to respond under pressure was tested, and the perennial predicament of all incumbents in relation to matters of state security was exposed. Significantly, though, the raising of the phone-tapping allegation during the debate was to spur later press criticism of Hawke’s commitment to civil rights: a clear example of the agenda-setting powers of televised debates.

The main criticism of the 1984 debate was the format, particularly the degree to which direct exchange between the candidates was substituted by the ‘joint press conference’ format. This led The Australian newspaper to editorialise the morning after the debate that ‘If such events are to become part of the future ritual of election campaigns the arms-length situation which occurred last night must not be repeated. The interposition of six questioners made not only for dull debating but also dull television … the way to rivet the attention of millions of television viewers and to influence voters … is to show something of the gladiatorial spirit.’

Nonetheless, the debate was watched by an estimated 60% of the population: the largest audience for a political slot in Australian broadcasting history. Polls after the debate indicated a 1% advantage for Hawke over Peacock, with over one in five people polled left undecided; in two post-debate polls between 5 and 7% claimed that they would change their vote because of the debate, although this swing was not reflected in subsequent polls which were unrelated to debate responses.

A spurious factor in the post-debate analysis was the organisation of three ‘phone-in polls’ conducted by television stations. The self-selection of callers to such polls makes them quite unscientific, even though they were given legitimacy on the stations which ran them and in some of the press. All indicated a clear lead for Peacock’s Liberal Party, which went on to be defeated in the election, although its stronger-than-expected electoral showing was regarded by some as a reflection of Peacock’s debate performance. Barradough and Ward suggest that voters were influenced as much by media reporting of the debates as the debates themselves; the common perception that Peacock had ‘won’ the debate might have contributed to the size of the Liberal vote.

Hawke’s failure to utilise the debate to his advantage in 1984 led him to decline to debate with his Liberal opponent in 1987. In 1990 he agreed to debate, although, as the Sydney Morning Herald observed, ‘just by sitting on the same stage as Mr Hawke and by answering the same questions … Mr Peacock was able to project an image to millions of Australians that he and the Prime Minister were political equals. For an Opposition leader running behind in the polls, such an image can only be helpful …’ The problem for Hawke was that, having agreed to debate in 1984 (and, indeed, having mocked Fraser for his unwillingness to debate in 1983), he was in danger of appearing undemocratic if he refused to face Peacock for a second time running in 1990. The debate was organised by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and was broadcast simultaneously by its main commercial rival, Channel Nine. Other commercial channels did not show the debate, preferring to broadcast extracts in subsequent news broadcasts.

In the event, they probably made a wise broadcasting decision: the debate was judged to be rather dull and the panel of interrogating journalists failed to divert the participants from their well-rehearsed answers. A poll conducted for The Australian in the hour after the debate indicated a ‘win’ for Hawke, although only 13% of those polled claimed that they were very or quite likely to change their votes as a result of having seen the debate. Once again, Channel Nine ran a phone-in poll after the debate and this was rightly criticised as a misleading exercise by Sol Lebovic, the managing director of Newsconf. As the 1990 debate took place at the beginning of the campaign it would have been interesting to assess the durability of its effects. As we shall see in the case of Canadian televised debates, it is not at all easy to determine the effects of debates upon the behaviour of voters, and where there are such effects they may be indirect. Unfortunately, no such impact study was carried out on the 1990 Australian debate.

In the 1993 federal election two formal televised debates were held between Prime Minister Paul Keating and Opposition leader John Hewson. The first was broadcast early in the campaign, as in 1990, and the second on the weekend before the election. The first debate followed the format of 1984 and 1990: one moderator with a panel of journalists selected by the ABC. The second debate format was different, involving only a single moderator to question and facilitate exchanges between the two party leaders. The 1993 debates were to cause as much public discussion concerning the decisions of the television stations as about the contributions to the debates by Keating and Howard. Once again, the ABC produced the debate, offering a clean feed to its main commercial rival,
Channel Nine.

In an attempt to enliven the debates, and also to win viewers from the ABC, Channel Nine decided to use a so-called people-meter as a means of providing home audiences with a constant graphic image of reactions to the debate by a group of 128 swinging voters. The display of this line across the screen, with a second line (which became known as 'the worm') rising above it or below it depending upon the sense of attraction or alienation felt by the floating voters, was generally regarded as a piece of gimmickry which detracted from the informing and deliberative value of a debate. Both main parties criticised the innovation: Andrew Robb, the Federal Director of the Liberal Party, stated that 'We are very unhappy about the plan to have people-meters showing instant reactions on the television screen during the debate. People are very cynical already about politics. This sort of gimmickry will only make them more cynical ... We are desperately in need of a serious, comprehensive debate between the two leaders. It's going to trivialise the whole thing.' Paul Keating also called for quality post-debate polling involving detailed interviews with voters. Ian Carroll, the executive producer of the ABC debate, complained that 'Channel Nine is turning the debate into a game show ... I can't think of anything more farcical than having a bouncing ball at the bottom of the screen. One, it's totally distracting, and, two, it's treating their audience like idiots.'

In the event, viewers rejected the criticism: more watched the debate on Channel Nine than on the ABC. The worm became a major feature in post-debate press analysis, was used again in the second debate, and has now become a feature of New Zealand leaders' debate broadcasting. In the aftermath of the 1992 British general election, Rentoul, Robinson and Braunholtz made out a case for the use of people-metering as a scientific and journalistic device which allows politicians and broadcasters to tap 'the spontaneous response of the inarticulate majority'. Bean, an Australian academic specialising in electoral behaviour, has cast doubt upon the emotional-level responses measured by people-metering and has warned of the danger that assessing debates on the basis of such ephemeral data might assume far greater significance than it deserves should it influence public opinion.

Between the first and second ABC debates, Keating challenged Hewson to appear on Channel Nine's popular programme, A Current Affair, to debate the single issue of the Liberal Coalition's proposed Goods and Services Tax. This rather raucous confrontation led press commentators to applaud the idea of a single-issue debate and The Australian to editorialise that 'the next debate should steer a mid-course between its two predecessors: the dull but worthy Great Debate on the ABC, and the Nine Network's studio slanging match.'

An attempt to enliven the second ABC debate had already been agreed by having a format with only a single moderator and no panel of journalists. The appointment of Kerry O'Brien as debate moderator was opposed by the Liberal Party, which sought to change the debate format so that the candidates would be questioned by a panel of fifty to one hundred 'typical Australians.' Hewson, whose party was leading in the polls, was doubtless attracted by the use made of such a relatively soft format by Bill Clinton in the US presidential election four months earlier. More cynically, it might be argued that Hewson preferred to avoid the robust assertiveness of O'Brien's questioning, particularly after having lost ground to Keating in the direct exchange on Channel Nine. The ABC threatened to proceed with the debate in the absence of Dr Hewson, and the Liberals finally agreed to the format, accusing Labor of being unprepared to face the people. The experience of the 1992 'Electronic Town Meeting Debate' in Richmond, Virginia had undoubtedly thrown a new light upon the conduct of debate formats. In this debate 209 'uncommitted potential voters' from the area of Richmond in Virginia were selected by Gallup to form a questioning audience before whom the candidates had to prove themselves. The event was moderated by Carole Simpson of ABC News. The format was regarded by several US journalists as a defining moment in the campaign, more successfully exposing the leaders' policies and characters to public scrutiny than previous debates. The simulated Town Meeting sought to revive the ideal of the Habermasian public sphere. The format was repeated in the USA in the 1996 presidential debates, as well as in several primary and state election debates.

The debate about debate formats once again preceded the 1996 televised leaders' confrontation. Indeed, a degree of confusion between electoral politics and the politics of media production now seem to have become a ritual aspect of these events – just as in 1992 the US presidential candidates spent much of the early part of their campaigns disputing debate terms with the Commission on Presidential Debates which had been established precisely to avoid such clashes. The Liberals in 1996 blackballed ABC's Kerry O'Brien, partly in response to allegations of bias against John Hewson in the 1993 debate, and partly (though only implicitly) on the grounds that he had worked for Gough Whitlam and Lionel Bowen in the mid-Seventies. Finally, it was decided that Channel Nine should produce the 1996 debates: one early in the campaign and one on the final weekend. Ray Martin was appointed as moderator (without a panel of journalists) and conducted the debates in a rather less formal style than previous ABC formats. The opposition Leader, John Howard, was found by an AGB McNair Agepoll to have won the first debate narrowly, but, of much greater analytical interest, 32% of voters polled claimed that the debate had influenced their voting intention, more than double those who had traditionally given this answer in previous post-debate polls. This finding accords with the thesis stated in 1994 by Bean who noted the increase in the percentage of Australian floating voters in 1990 and 1993: 'Survey evidence indicates that at the 1987 election, nearly three-quarters of the electorate had made up their minds before the election campaign began. In 1990 and 1993 this number dropped to a little over half.' It is amongst the floating voters, with little or no party loyalty, that feelings about party leaders are likely to have a major impact and it is in this sense that the debates could be a key factor in
deciding the elections. (Of course, it is just possible that the rise in the number of undecided voters at the beginning of the campaign is an effect rather than a cause of the increased significance of televised debates.) Prior to 1996 substantive data did not exist to support Bean’s thesis that debates influence floating voters. Given the greater suggestibility and volatility of floating voters, it may be that not only the debates but the post-debate assessments of winners and losers could influence their choice.

Channel Nine dispensed with live showing of ‘the worm’ in its second debate, but retained it for the purpose of an immediate post-debate programme assessing the impact of the debates. The possibility of this essentially emotive and unscientific form of assessment influencing viewers’ conclusions about the debates is a worry that cannot be discounted.

In a bid for the debate to reach out to the public, Channel Nine invited viewers to submit questions which Ray Martin would put to the candidates in the second debate. The choice of questions put by Martin was widely criticised in the Australian press, with questions regarded as lacking any electoral salience in the Australian context (attitudes to drugs, abortion, homosexuality, condoning machines in schools) seemingly added to draw the leaders away from complex policy issues. This may well be compatible with a recognition that the factors determining the voting preferences of floating voters are markedly different from traditional political debate questions in that they rest more upon an appeal to underlying values than to policy consequences.

In general, the 1996 debates marked a descent from the loftier deliberative values of 1984. *The Australian Financial Review* lamented the fact that ‘the [1996] debates had one main thing in common: in neither was the crucial issue of how to put the Federal Budget on a sound financial footing addressed.’ Michael Gordon in *The Australian* observed that ‘The second great debate was a great contest until it became diverted into a cul de sac of social issues upon which Paul Keating and John Howard fundamentally agree. As a result, it left the election campaign precisely where it was before the two leaders met for their final face-to-face encounter.’ In part, this descent into tabloid-style debating reflected a genuine attempt to achieve greater viewer accessibility, particularly in view of the party strategists’ increased interest in targeting undecided, apolitical voters. There is a clear distinction to be drawn, however, between anodyne questioning on consensual moral issues and an attempt to move the debate closer to the interests of the less politically sophisticated audience. The best way to achieve the latter is to devise a format which allows the audience to question the candidates.

**The Canadian debates**

The first televised leaders’ debate in Canada was organised in 1962 by Radio Canada in the Quebec provincial election. Daniel Johnson of the Union Nationale debated with provincial Liberal leader Jean Lesage on 11 November, three days before the election. The leaders were questioned by a panel of journalists on specific, pre-agreed issues. In 1971 the province of Ontario had its first televised leaders’ debate. Between then and now every province of Canada has run at least one such debate, with Quebec even going so far, in 1985, as to make televised leaders’ debates mandatory – a position which was rescinded in 1989.

The first federal election leaders’ debate was broadcast in 1968. It was initiated by the CBC and CTV networks and involved the two new leaders of Canada’s largest parties – Pierre Trudeau for the Liberal Party and Robert Stanfield for the Progressive Conservatives – as well as Ed Broadbent, the leader of the smaller New Democratic Party, and Réal Caouette, the Social Credit leader who was only permitted to join the last section of the debate because of the relative smallness of his party. The debate adopted the rather unrewarding ‘joint press conference’ format in which the leaders were questioned by an interviewing panel. The dullness of the event was accentuated by the decision for it to be bilingual, with simultaneous translation serving as something of a distraction. The 1968 debate was not regarded as a success and no further federal leaders’ debates were organised for over a decade.

It was in 1979 that the now traditional format for the Canadian debates was established, allowing for more direct exchanges between candidates and only a minimal role for the panel of journalists. The network organisers (CBC, CTV and Global) had to enter into extremely lengthy negotiations with the party leaders and strategists. The format finally agreed combined the 1969 ‘joint press conference’ structure, based on the US model, with a more adversarial confrontation in which there were three rounds, each involving two of the leaders, who were encouraged to cross-question one another after each question from the panel of journalists had been answered. So, at the beginning of the debate each leader was invited to present a three-minute introductory statement; this was followed by three rounds (Clark v. Broadbent; Trudeau v. Broadbent; Trudeau v. Clark); and in conclusion each leader was given four minutes to wind up. This format was more successful than 1968, even though French-speaking viewers were denied a simultaneous translation. According to Fletcher, half of the 15 million eligible voters in Canada watched this debate, which, given that only 26% of French-speaking viewers watched the monolingual broadcast, was a healthy audience rating.

In 1980 the Trudeau government lost the confidence of Parliament and party animosities were such that no debate could be negotiated. In 1984, with new leaders at the head of the two main parties, both seeking to become better known to the Canadian public, a televised leaders’ debate was again negotiated. Firstly, it was agreed that two debates should be held: one in French and the other in English. This was a more elegant solution to Canada’s linguistic duality than the confusing translations of 1968 or the non-recognition of the French language in 1979, but it clearly puts at a disadvantage party leaders whose French is not fluent. (John Turner, the Liberal leader, suffered from this linguistic disadvantage in the 1984 debate.) Secondly, it was agreed that the leaders would draw lots to decide who would
face whom. In the 1984 English-language debate, Broadbent faced Turner in the first round, Mulroney faced Broadbent in the second round and, as an appropriate climax, the two main party leaders, Mulroney and Turner, faced each other in the third and final round. Each round lasted for thirty minutes. As in 1979, the debaters were given three minutes to open and four minutes to conclude and the main section comprised three rounds in which two leaders were first questioned by journalists and then allowed to engage in direct exchanges. Each of the debates lasted for two hours.

In 1988 the election was so dominated by the single issue of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States that it was suggested that a specific debate be broadcast on this subject. This was to the distinct advantage of the Liberal and NDP leaders, who regarded the Agreement as a political weak point for Prime Minister Mulroney, but was rejected by the latter who finally agreed to a format in which the issue would be debated as one of several subjects in a three-hour-long debate. The rather complicated format for the 1988 debate involved nine seventeen-minute confrontations, each involving two of the leaders. There was some criticism that three hours was too long for viewers to be subjected to a debate, even though critics were reminded that German and Danish debates tended to last longer. Nonetheless, approximately two-thirds of all Canadian voters watched either the French or English debates in both 1984 and 1988, with a slight ratings increase in the longer 1988 debate.

The 1993 debate preceded the quite remarkable ‘Canadian wipe-out’ of the Progressive Conservative Party, reducing them from a government with a parliamentary majority to a party with only two seats in the Canadian Parliament. Clearly, this dramatic election outcome had little to do with the leader’s performance in the debate and served more to demonstrate that once a party has collapsed internally and lost popular support there is not much that its leader can do, including any positive impact arising from a televised debate, to save the party’s fortunes. The implosion of Conservative politics in Canada in 1995 required the negotiation of a new debate format. Once again, there were two debates: the first in French and the second in English. But, in addition to the three traditional participants, the leader of the Bloc Quebecois (which had split from the Progressive Conservaties in Quebec and the leader of the right-wing Reform Party (which had split from the Progressive Conservatives in the western provinces, and entered the election with one Member in each House) were invited to participate in the televised leaders’ debate alongside the leader of the Progressive Conservatives and then Prime Minister, Kim Campbell.

The criteria for inclusion became a major issue in the 1993 debate. This was not the first time that party leaders excluded from the debate had made a political issue of their exclusion: in 1979 the exclusion of Fabien Roy, the leader of the Ralliement créditiste, on the grounds that he only spoke French and his party was only contesting in Quebec, making them non-contenders for federal government, was attacked as a francophobe policy; in 1988 the Green Party went to court, citing its right to freedom of expression under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, as the basis for entitlement to participate, but the Supreme Court of Ontario dismissed the application on the grounds that such a right did not apply to televised debates. Two parties challenged the criteria for inclusion in 1993, but the courts declined to interfere in the selection of participants in a television production and the number stood at five.

The first part of the debate comprised five twenty-minute sections in which the five leaders were questioned by journalists and then allowed to question one another. As in 1984 and 1988, each leader was given time for opening and closing remarks. In 1993 the leaders preferred to engage in direct exchanges than to be guided by the journalists’ questions. The exchanges were sharp, heated and often raucous. Statements made during the debate by Kim Campbell regarding her government’s deficit policy were questioned explicitly by the leader of the Bloc Quebecois, who had served in her cabinet, in the immediate post-debate press conference the Progressive Conservative leader was forced to concede that her comments regarding the deficit had been misleading, and this proved highly damaging, casting doubt upon her political integrity. To some extent, the Liberal leader, Jean Chrétien, had only to sit back and allow the two breakaway parties of the Right to destroy his main rival. The final forty minutes of the debate was devoted to a new format, undoubtedly influenced by the US ‘Town Meeting’ debate of 1992. A geographically and demographically representative audience was selected and flown to Ottawa from various parts of Canada at great expense (approximately $75,000) and invited to ask questions of the five leaders. This was the first time that a Canadian televised debate had been conducted before a studio audience. The general view was that this exercise worked better as a sociological model than as a means of producing good television debate or political discussion. The provisional proposal for the 1997 Canadian leaders’ debate (which is still being negotiated) is for there to be an audience present, but for it not to perform a questioning role.

There remains the question of the impact of these debates. Through the Canadian National Election Surveys, and as a result of some relatively recent academic research, it is possible to draw some clearer conclusions about the impact of Canadian debates than Australian ones. But, as is well known, any study of electoral effects can only ever be approximate. Election campaigns are brief, highly-politicised periods in which a range of factors, both contrived and inadvertent, influence the behaviour of voters. Furthermore, the Canadian electorate is highly volatile in its voting behaviour; it would be interesting to see the methodologies employed by Canadian political scientists applied to the effects of the Australian televised debates, for the general party loyalties of Australian voters would offer a more predictive indication of the effects that a British televised leaders’ debate might have. There is also a danger in examining debate impact, of concentrating solely upon whether debates lead viewers to change their voting intentions. As was discussed in relation to Australian debates, the main effect of debates in this
respect is likely to be on undecided voters who have no voting intentions.

There is very little academic research to show that debates result in major vote swings, even though they might intensify voting intentions amongst the weakly committed or change voters' perceptions of the image and character of particular leaders. Methodologically, there is little to be gained in seeking election results in debate impacts; most of the early US political scientists examining the Kennedy-Nixon and Ford-Carter post-debate data sought such effects and were disappointed. The absence of such dramatic effects does not mean that debates are irrelevant to electoral behaviour. On the contrary, they indicate that the electorate is rather more mature than to determine the future of government on the basis of a single broadcast or a series of them. The more significant research evidence suggests that debates perform a democratic role in giving greater access to party platforms and knowledge of political issues to those who are least interested in politics; and in increasing voter participation, including turnout.

LeDuc and Price, in their study of the impact of the 1979 Canadian debate, found that the percentage of English-speaking Canadians who watched the debate was nearly as high as the percentage who read about politics in a newspaper or discussed politics at all during the campaign. It was nearly four times as high as the percentage who attended a political meeting or contacted a politician during the campaign. 21% of Canadian voters had not made up their minds how to vote at the time when the debate took place, and those who watched the debate were more likely to vote for the winning party (44%) than those who did not (31%).

Barr's research suggests a slightly stronger impact of the debates on voting, concluding that 'the 1984 debates had some impact by apparently influencing individuals who voted Liberal in 1980 to vote Conservative in 1984. Analysis of the 1988 election revealed that watching a debate appears to have made people who voted for the New Democratic Party in 1984 more likely to vote Liberal in 1988.' Neither of these effects determined the election outcomes: the Progressive Conservatives' 1984 victory was overwhelming and hardly dependent upon the marginal impact attributed to debates, and the Liberals lost the 1988 election, although it may be that the post-debate swing to them made the closing period of the campaign more closely contested than it would otherwise have been. A greater impact was found by Barr in terms of debate watchers' perceptions of party leaders: 'in both 1984 and 1988 debate watchers evaluated all three party leaders significantly more positively than non-watchers.' This is a consequence of leaders seeming more real to voters viewing them in action than to those so alienated from the political process that all politicians seemed identical in their remoteness. Disappointingly, Barr's analysis of the National Election Study found that debate watchers learned more from the debates about leaders' images and performances than about policy issues. For low-media users, with little other exposure, the debates did provide a much-needed increase in their relatively low knowledge of the political issues in the election and their ability to identify policies. In political cultures everywhere which are facing problems of growing voter disaffection and reduced turnout this contribution to the political knowledge of the least politically sophisticated and most disaffected should not be underestimated.

Blais and Boyer's groundbreaking study of the impact of the 1988 debates suggests that 'the debates had a substantial and enduring impact on the vote.' According to this finding, the timing of debates is extremely important because 'The initial impact was felt rapidly, over a period of three days.' The direct effects of watching the debates, however, might be no greater than indirect effects, i.e. perceptions of who 'won' and who 'lost' and even indirect information gained by non-watchers who were then influenced by the post-debate consensus. Strong evidence of the power of indirect debate influence goes back to the Ford-Carter debates of 1976 in which Gerald Ford made his famous gaffe concerning Eastern Europe. Research clearly indicates that Ford's poor performance, highlighted by this comment, had only minimal influence on immediate post-debate verdicts by voters. But once the mass media had made Ford's gaffe the focus of their post-debate commentary in the days following the debate, a majority of voters decided that Ford's debate performance had had a negative impact upon them. (Perhaps this is a classical manifestation of Noelle-Neumann's 'spiral of silence' effect.) Similarly, it is interesting to observe the differences between public perceptions of debates in the Australian polls conducted within an hour of their conclusion and the more settled, and usually contradictory, voting trends which occur subsequently. This is why Blais and Boyer favour a combined design method to evaluate debate impact, comprising both panel reactions and time-series analysis.

The lessons for the UK

Having examined televised leaders' debates in several countries, and particularly Australia and Canada, the overwhelming impression is one of disappointment. The debates seem rarely to have performed the functions associated with the enhancement of democratic culture, and one is left straining optimism in seeking to provide positive answers to the questions quoted earlier from Carlin.

Some evidence suggests that the events perform a minor value in terms of political education, particularly for eligible voters with almost no other contact with formal sources of political communication. The discursive and dialogic quality of most of the debates have been extremely poor, with politicians rarely reaching levels of political depth commonly generated by face-to-face interviews with professional journalists, or even extensive appearances on interactive talk radio programmes. The standard of oratory in debates rarely reaches higher than the mediocre, and frequently descends from that level because of the constraints of time compression, the need to recite rehearsed policy statements and the temptation to indulge in negative attack rather than the statement of a coherent case. None of this is likely to do much to inspire confidence in
electoral politics, and, while one may take modest comfort from the evidence cited concerning the educative impact of debates upon the politically unsophisticated, there is no available research data concerning the possible negative impact of such debates upon the confidence in the political system of the more sophisticated.

Two main problems of political debates as they have evolved can be identified:

1. The formats adopted have been so vigorously negotiated as to limit opportunities for penetrating, extensive exchanges between the candidates or between the leaders and audiences. No format is going to suit all of the party leaders, as well as the broadcasters, but there is more likelihood of the audience being served by a serious democratic debate if determination of the format could at least in part be passed to an independent body concerned only with that objective. While some formats have been less successful than others, few are inherently worthless. Whether a panel of interviewers is used or direct exchanges encouraged or a more proactive role given to the debate moderator, the most important concern should be to encourage deliberation amongst the viewing audience rather than regard the debates as events which will win or lose the election for one of the lucky contestants.

2. The obsession with ‘winning’ and ‘losing’ debates should be discouraged. At its worst, the Australian and New Zealand use of the infamous ‘worm’ makes a mockery of mature debate and is disruptive to public deliberation. Post-debate spinning will not be eradicated, but the extent to which ‘the debate about the debate’ has now become almost more of a story than the debate itself only serves to devalue the purpose of having a live and transparent debate in which voters can judge politicians for themselves. The effect of such indirect debate impact may well lead to a position in which the debate becomes a mere conflict of unelected news managers seeking to persuade debate watchers that the debate was not as they witnessed it and to convey edited, semi-fabricated versions of the debate to non-watchers.

There are strong arguments against Britain going down the road of having televised leaders’ debates. It may be argued that such debates will add to the presidential imagery of British politics, which is at odds with the constitutional reality of how the British political system is supposed to work. After all, if one is not electing a Prime Minister, why indulge in a televised fiction that such an election is taking place? Why not continue to invite party leaders as well as other party spokespeople to have their say, sometimes in the same studio or consecutively, so that the correct image of the election of a majority party capable of forming a government is conveyed?

It can also be argued that Britain has a record of direct confrontations between the main party leaders twice a week while Parliament is sitting, at Prime Minister’s Question Time. Asked in February 1992 by Labour MP Dennis Skinner, whether he would participate in a televised debate with the then Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, the Prime Minister responded, ‘As the Honourable Gentleman knows, we hold televised debates in the House twice a week.’ The same point was made by Major in the Today interview quoted at the head of this paper. It is a glib response to the call for a serious head-to-head debate which depends upon an ambiguous use of the concept of debate. Clearly, there is a substantial difference between the Leader of the Opposition having an opportunity to ask two or three questions of the Prime Minister about matters of government policy and an extensive, structured confrontation in which all serious contenders for the premiership can propound their policies and question their rivals. The disparity of constitutional positions during PMQs, with the Leader of the Opposition (and others) only allowed to question, and the Prime Minister expected to give executive-briefed answers rather than raise questions with his opponent, does not amount to what can usefully be regarded as a debate. The theatricality of PMQs, exacerbated since the arrival of cameras in the Commons, has diminished the dignity of these events rather than in any sense showing them off as models of political discourse.

Paradoxically, it is precisely because there is a tradition of televised confrontation between the party leaders, and precisely because the leaders are seen to be party chiefs rather than presidential candidates, that a British televised leaders’ debate might avoid some of the disadvantages observed in other countries. In short, a British debate involving party leaders will not be a unique moment. It will be electorally significant – probably the high-point of the campaign period – and one can assume that the first-ever televised debate will be enormously hyped and will reach a record audience for election broadcasting (possibly between 12 and 15 million viewers), but it will differ from US, Australian and Canadian debates for the very reason that British party leaders are well-known figures whose skills in parliamentary debating are already known to the politically-attentive public. The main function of the event is likely to be the exposure of the leaders and their parties to those who are not usually likely to watch political broadcasting.

In 1964 the BBC, impressed by the 1960 US presidential debate, sought to organise a televised debate between Alec Douglas-Home and Harold Wilson. The Conservatives recognised Home’s weakness as a TV performer and proposed a series of confrontations between ministers and their shadows. In the 1966 election Wilson was challenged to a TV debate by Heath, but, despite Wilson’s love affair with television and his public soundings in favour of such a debate, the event was not negotiated. This pattern continued through the Wilson-Heath elections of 1970 and 1974. In the 1979 election London Weekend Television invited the party leaders to debate and Callaghan, confident with the medium, agreed. Thatcher was urged by The Sun to ‘TAKE HIM ON, MAGGIE’, but Sir Gordon Reece, on the basis of private party polls, feared that the Thatcher image might come off poorly against Callaghan. In her letter of reply to IWT Mrs Thatcher wrote that ‘Personally, I believe that issues and policies, not personalities, decide an election. We are not electing a President.’ In 1983 and 1987 Thatcher maintained this stance,
informing the Leader of the Opposition in 1987 that she had no intention of offering him a national platform by debating with him.39

It now seems likely that UK politics will have a televised leaders’ debate before the end of the century. This places British political culture, somewhat belatedly, in line with almost every comparable constitutional democracy in the world.

Incumbents have usually only favoured debates when they are seriously behind in the polls and feel that they have little to lose and much to gain. Of course, the risk faced by all incumbents in sharing a debating platform with their rivals for their office is that their status is diminished by the very act of contesting on a level playing field. It is a zero-sum strategy, not for the timid. Whether desirable or not, the debate is likely to produce a ‘loser’ as well as a ‘winner’. This public perception will undoubtedly have an impact on the course of the election.

One could deny the incumbent’s right to veto a televised debate or to seek to enforce partisan conditions by making such events mandatory. Although this option has considerable support in other countries where there is a tradition of televised debates, and is a law in the US state of New Jersey where recipients of state election funding are compelled to participate in a televised debate, it is preferable to retain the right of any one leader to choose not to participate than for there to be legislative regulation of such events and the inevitable intervention of lawyers. In the event that the next Prime Minister is a candidate who has called persistently for televised debates as a contribution to the democratic electoral process, it will be very difficult for him to decline to debate at the end of his term of office, as was seen in the case of Bob Hawke – and once a debate or series of debates becomes a feature of one election it will very likely become a permanent feature.

Regardless of whether one wants them to happen (and the only existing poll evidence suggests clearly that UK voters do), British televised debates inevitably will happen. Given that this is so, what must be decided is the best format for them. It is in this respect that the comparative case studies should offer some guidance.

The format of a UK debate

Now that the decision to have a televised leaders’ debate has been accepted in principle, it is imperative that it should be seen to be organised with the utmost fairness, with an independent body appointed to ensure that the public, as well as the politicians and broadcasters, are properly served. How, then should it be run? The democratic criteria outlined at the start of this paper are prerequisites for a debate that will serve the electorate. The proposed recommendations here should be considered in conjunction with those underlying democratic values. Two questions which could exercise much energy and lead to huge antagonisms need to be answered at the outset.

1. Who should take part? All three major party leaders must be invited to participate. It would be utterly unacceptable to exclude the leader of the third party, considering that it is contesting as many seats as the Conservative and Labour parties, will win millions of votes and a significant share of the overall votes cast, and may play a key role in forming or influencing the formation of the next government. Until or unless those conditions do not apply to the third party, its leader must be invited to participate on an equal basis with the other party leaders. It may be that he or she will be expected by the public to address some questions which will be different from those which are relevant to the other leaders, but there cannot be a democratic debate which excludes him or her.

2. What about Scotland and Wales? The answer to this question depends upon the state of support for the parties in these countries at the time of a debate, and whether by then a Scottish Parliament and/or a Welsh assembly have been established. It is right that there should be separate debates for Scotland and Wales and that leaders of the nationalist parties are invited to appear together with either the three British party leaders or, if the parties so choose, Secretaries of State and their shadows in the opposition parties. As long as these countries are part of the United Kingdom and subject to the sovereignty of the British government, it would be unwise to prevent the UK parties’ leaders’ debate from being broadcast in Wales and Scotland. Not broadcasting it there would only mean that voters in those areas would be denied an opportunity to see the leaders of parties contesting seats in their areas in debate, and would be dependent upon news editing of debate highlights.

Election broadcasting in Northern Ireland has traditionally been exceptional and this will no doubt continue as long as the principal UK parties are not organised there. Televised debates between Northern Irish party leaders are likely to contribute to a greater spirit of mutual recognition and understanding. Such debates need not preclude the broadcasting of the UK party leaders’ debate in Northern Ireland.

Subsidiary questions of organisation and inclusion need to be regulated at the outset. No minority party should be able to buy its way on to a party leaders’ debate by putting up candidates in every constituency and appearing more significant than is its real support amongst the electorate. As in Canada in 1993, the decision about inclusion must be based upon the political credibility of the party leader in relation to the formation of the next government. This is not to rule out the case for second debates involving representatives from a wider range of parties or special features on minority parties which are making a particular contribution to public discourse. Indeed, it would be a pity if the organisation of a single national leaders’ debate substituted imaginative planning by broadcasters of discussions involving less well-known political positions or the current BBC custom of inviting party spokespeople on particular subjects to come together to discuss in depth an issue of significance in the election.

The specific format for the first UK leaders’ debate is likely to be tightly regulated and conducive to spontaneity. The evidence from Australia, Canada and other countries is that such formal first debate
encounters are likely to be relaxed in subsequent debates, partly because parties and broadcasters soon become aware that the viewing audience wants to see a more flexible format and partly because the confidence of the leaders develops after the precedent of not debating in the same studio has been breached.

The most elaborate proposed format for a first series of British leaders’ debates has been proposed by Sir Robin Day, the veteran ITV and BBC broadcaster who has long advocated the case for such debates. He proposes that three national leaders’ debates should take place, each lasting one hour and each in a separate week of the campaign. In Weeks One and Three the Labour leader would debate with the Conservative leader; in Week Two the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat leaders would all debate together. In the two largest-party leaders’ debates each would open for five minutes (the order determined by the toss of a coin and reversed in the other debate) followed by fifteen minutes for each to question and challenge their opponent, ten minutes for both to respond to questions from the chairman, and two minutes each to sum up. The three leader debate would be rather more complicated, with each leader to open for three minutes (the order to be drawn by lot), eight minutes for each to question each of the others, eight minutes for chairman’s questions and two minutes for each to conclude. The chairman/moderator would play a relatively insignificant role in the Day format: mainly timekeeping, with a brief interviewing role towards the end. Day would have no panel of journalists. Neither would he want a studio audience (for fear of it sounding biased in a three-leader debate) nor phoning-in of questions. The main advantage of the Day format is its relative simplicity.

The problem with Day’s proposals is that, as a debate series, it only includes the third party as a lesser participant. Viewed as a three-hour debate, the overall time given to the Liberal Democrat leader is less than that offered to the other leaders and is compressed into one, separate debate. That noted, the Liberal Democrat leader does have centre stage for most of the second debate, putting him in a more prominent leadership position than he is accorded in parliamentary debates. Day’s emphasis on direct exchanges between party leaders and his total rejection of the “joint press conference” is likely to create a more meaningful debate for viewers and to offer less room for complacency to the leaders and their spin doctors. It is more in line with the evolved debate formats in Australia and Canada, as well as France. The difficulty of having a balanced studio audience is accepted, given that at any one time the third party is likely to be closer to one main party as opposed to the other. Furthermore, in the presence of a particularly unpopular leader (as was the case with the Canadian Prime Minister in 1993) the antipathy of a studio audience could undermine a fair exchange of views. If, however, only one of the three debates proposed by Day is to involve all three party leaders, there is a case for having a studio audience in the two-leader debates.

The problem with spreading the debates over the three weeks of the campaign relates to the likelihood of the first debate having a greater impact, including the indirect impact on non-watchers who reach their conclusion from commentaries on the debate. Given that Canada in 1988, Germany before 1990 and Denmark have all had successful three-hour debates which do not seem to be beyond the concentration spans of vast numbers of viewers, there is a strong case for combining Day’s three debates into a single three-hour debate. (An alternative would be for the three sections to be recorded live and then broadcast as three hour-long debates.) The first section could comprise Day’s proposed two-leader confrontation; the second section could comprise his three-leader format (which would have the advantage of not isolating the leader of the third party into a separate debate); and the third section could either return to the two-leader format or, preferably, adopt the form proposed in the next paragraph. With a single debate it can be scheduled within the last week of the campaign, leaving a minimum time for indirect impact. It would be a good idea for the debate to be held on a Sunday night before the Thursday polling day and repeated later on channels which do not show it live.

A significant proposed change to the Day format involves the participation of the viewing and voting audience. Democratic expectations have moved on since the first ‘television election’ of 1959. In some respects, television had less of a role to play in involving the public in political debate in 1959 because there were still many opportunities for voters to attend local public meetings and interact with constituency campaigns. The lamentable decline of such local campaigning is in direct proportion to the recognition by the main parties that they must now address a single national audience rather than six hundred and fifty odd constituency audiences. The losers in this process have been the increasingly atomised voters, at home, estranged from the arena of discussion and frequently disaffected. This is most likely to be the case with first- and second-time voters. There is evidence that such potential voters are increasingly not even registering to vote; have considerable cynicism towards electoral politics if they are registered; and often vote on the basis of negative anger against the government of the day rather than educated policy judgements. A televised leaders’ debate could give these hitherto neglected voters a chance to play a role in helping to set the electoral agenda.

The proposal here is to let them question the party leaders in the third section of the debate. This part of the debate could utilise the phone-in format, which has already been used for the extensive public questioning of party leaders in the three pre-polling days on BBC’s TV and radio simulcast Election Call programmes. It could also utilise the technology of the Internet, used increasingly by voters in the age-range in question and already used by the BBC in its party conference call-ins and by Channel Four in its People’s Election output. Of course, such interactivity within a major debating format would require the most careful monitoring to ensure reasonable balance (including recognition that many young voters are disaffected or confused) and to eradicate attempts by any political or pressure group to
distort the process of authentic public questioning. It would be necessary to ensure that questioners do fall into the 'young voters' age-range: probably eighteen to twenty-four. The present writer's preliminary research into the political value of phone-in radio programmes suggests that such monitoring could ensure that this format is used responsibly and in the interest of high-quality, balanced democratic debate.

The great advantage of this interactive format is that it permits the public to enter the debate: to claim the debate agenda as their own. This will attract viewers who might otherwise not bother to watch a leaders' debate. It is likely to encourage participation, discussion and perhaps more positive voting. It would be an unprecedented addition to a leaders' debate format, putting the British debate in the forefront of the active endeavour to educate its voters by empowering them at the very point when they have just become voters.

Evidence from the 'Town Meeting' debates in the United States in 1992 and 1996 suggests that viewers like such real encounters between the politicians and the people. The format is seen as a move away from dry political dogma towards the politics of human experience and the expression of underlying values. This is particularly appealing to more apolitical voters: the very people upon whom televised debates are seen to have had the greatest impact. Those voters less interested in such a format will still have two-thirds of the debate run along lines more conducive to traditional policy evaluation, including valuable direct exchanges between professional politicians.

British politics much needs an injection of stimulating public deliberation. Despite a relatively high level of participation in the UK electoral process, there is a danger that the political rituals of electioneering have left millions of potential voters feeling as if they are estranged spectators of the electoral debate. Using the medium of television to bring meaningful, live debate between the candidates for the premiership into the homes of millions of voters is but one step towards creating a more deliberative democracy.

There are many conceivable formats for the debate. The one proposed here is not offered in a spirit of dogmatic rigidity; although the democratic advantages of there being some form of audience participation is proposed emphatically. The debate, when it happens, must belong to all of us, and in taking ownership of it we will surely be nourishing the public sphere of democratic deliberation.

The proposed format for a UK televised leaders' debate is shown opposite.
Proposed Format
for a UK Televised Leaders’ Debate

Party A = party which formed the last government; Party B = party which was the main opposition party in the last Parliament; Party C = the third party. For ease of interpretation in March 1997, the then leaders’ names have been added.

2 mins. Introduction by neutral chair/moderator.
5 mins. Leader of Party A (Major) opens.
5 mins. Leader of Party B (Blair) opens.
15 mins. Leader of Party A (Major) questions and challenges leader of Party B (Blair).
15 mins. Leader of Party B (Blair) questions and challenges leader of Party A (Major).
10 mins. Both reply to questions from chair/moderator.
2 mins. Leader of Party A (Major) sums up.
2 mins. Leader of Party B (Blair) sums up.
3 mins. Chair/moderator introduces second section and solicits calls and e-mail questions from 18-24 year-olds for third section of the debate. (A call for these will have already been announced on channels broadcasting the debate some days before the commencement of the broadcast.)
3 mins. Leader of Party C (Asbjorn) opens.
8 mins. Leader of Party A (Major) questions leader of Party C (Asbjorn).
8 mins. Leader of Party B (Blair) questions leader of Party C (Asbjorn).
8 mins. Leader of Party C (Asbjorn) questions leader of party B (Blair).
8 mins. Leader of Party C (Asbjorn) questions leader of party A (Major).
8 mins. Chair/moderator questions all three leaders.
4 mins. Leader of Party C (Asbjorn) sums up.
4 mins. Leader of Party B (Blair) sums up.
4 mins. Leader of Party A (Major) sums up.
2 mins. Chair/moderator explains that callers, letter-writers or on-line contributors will now have their chance to question the leaders. Chair/moderator to ensure that questions directed at all leaders are answered by each in approximately equal time, and that equal numbers of questions are directed at particular leaders. A rate of one question every five minutes on average should be aimed for.
60 mins Interactive debate with new voters.

The chair/moderator to have the final word, encouraging viewers to use their votes.
References


2. See Richard Crossman, "The Politics of Television, TV and the Political Party Image," London, 1969; Michael Holstein argued on "The World this Weekend" (28.3.92) for broadcasters 'to give us the chance to get on to the issues ... we depend on you, there is no other way we can get over what we want to say.'


14. In those countries where they have been broadcast, televised leaders' debates have achieved amongst the highest ratings of any televised output, and by far the highest ratings for political output. In the USA approximately 80% of the population viewed at least one debate in 1960 and 90% watched at least one in 1976. Ratings for other countries are quoted in the body of the paper.


17. Valuable and personal observation from Ian Carroll of ABC and Peter Meakin of Channel Nine in Australia, as well as Ian Ward and Colin Hughes from the University of Queensland, were much appreciated in relation to the Australian study. Arnold Amber, of CBC, who has played a major production role in the past Canadian debates and is currently working on a debate for the next one, was extremely kind in supplying information and discussing the subject personally with me, Vol. I of the Canadian Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, pp.11-17, and Vol. 17 on "Media and Voters in Canadian Election Campaigns," are invaluable sources. I also spoke to several people in party leaders' offices in Canada, Australia and New Zealand whose candid comments on televised debates were much appreciated. None of those cited are responsible for any misinterpretations or wrong conclusions which have found their way into this paper.


20. B. Barrington and R. Ward, "Perceived Effects of Australia's First Nationally Television Political Debate," paper presented to Australian Communication Association, Canberra, 1986. The unpublished paper reports the findings of a telephone survey of a sample of voters in a rural area. The principal finding was that the manner in which the media reported who had won the debate had a notable impact upon viewers' perception of Peacock as the winner.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Dr David Butler for his useful comments on the first draft of this paper, appreciated comments were also received from Margaret Douglas, Helen Irwin and Peter Riddell. David Harris and Michael Pater contributed valuable editorial assistance and worthwhile comments. Jennifer O'Keeffe, a Hansard Scholar working at BBC Westminster in 1996, made a helpful contribution to the research. Several broadcasters and politicians have offered interesting advice. None of these is responsible for errors or omissions in this paper, for which the author bears sole responsibility.
The Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government

The principal objective of the Hansard Society, which was founded in 1944, is to promote knowledge of and interest in parliamentary government. It has an active schools' programme, such as 'mock elections' at the time of General Elections and elections to the European Parliament, and it also runs training seminars on how Government and Parliament function. The one-term Hansard Scholars Programme on British politics and society attracts students from leading American universities and colleges.

Through its Central and Eastern European Programme the Society runs conferences and workshops for parliamentarians, public servants and political scientists from the former Communist countries.

The Society’s publishing programme includes a quarterly journal in association with Oxford University Press, Parliamentary Affairs. It also publishes occasional research studies, in particular the findings of commissions invited to examine and to report on aspects of Parliamentary Government.

Benefits for members include at least four meetings a year of the Democratic Forum, when expert speakers analyse aspects of parliamentary government.

The Society is a non-party foundation which enjoys all-party support.

Details of membership and of current activities are available from:

The Hansard Society
St Philips Building North, Sheffield Street, London WC2A 2EX
Tel: (0171) 955 7478
Fax: (0171) 955 7492
E-Mail: hansard@lse.ac.uk

Recent Publications

THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON WOMEN AT THE TOP (1990) £7.50 (£6 to members).
ISBN 0 900432 21 7

CAMERAS IN THE COMMONS, a research study by Alistair Hetherington, Kay Weaver and Michael Ryle (1990) £10 (£8 to members). ISBN 0 900432 22 5


WOMEN AT THE TOP: progress after five years, King-Hall Paper No 2, by Prof Susan McRae (1996), £5 (£3 to members, £4 to schools). ISBN 0 900432 26 8

THE REPORT OF THE JOINT HANSARD SOCIETY/EUROPEAN POLICY FORUM COMMISSION ON THE REGULATION OF PRIVATISED UTILITIES (1997) £30 (£22.50 to members, £24 to schools)
ISBN 0 900432 27 6

All the above titles are available direct from the Society or through bookshops. The title below, which is published in association with the Society, is available as indicated.

THE PARLIAMENT AND GOVERNMENT POCKET BOOK 1996 £32 plus £1.50 p&p from NTC Publications Ltd, PO Box 69, Henley-on-Thames, Oxon RG9 1GB, ISBN 1 889314 09 1