

# Britain's Party Leaders Debate: An exercise in political engineering

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Thursday's televised debate between the leaders of Britain's three main parties was billed as an historic move towards a more participatory democracy. It was the first time that such an event has been held.

In the end, it only served to demonstrate the refusal of the ruling elite to allow even the most minimal expression of genuine democratic discussion and decision-making to cut across the agenda it dictates to its political hirelings.

This was a debate in which any possibility of the issues of concern to millions of voters being raised had been excluded a priori—a stage managed affair during which Gordon Brown for Labour, David Cameron for the Conservatives and Nick Clegg for the Liberal Democrats paraded their right-wing credentials before a hand-picked audience and responded to pre-selected questions.

Prior to it being held, the party leaders had negotiated a 76-point agreement on the debate's format. Three debates are to be held, each 90 minutes long, and screened in turn by ITV, Sky and the BBC. The first, held in Manchester, covered domestic affairs; the second will cover foreign affairs and the third the economy.

The questions were selected by a panel of journalists and the audience by pollsters ICM according to gender, age, ethnicity and social class. The audience was not allowed to either applaud or jeer.

This was not debate, but a form of political engineering in which an audience of over nine million people was subjected to carefully crafted propaganda.

Opening, one-minute statements saw Brown warn of the danger of a double-dip recession and the need to stick with Labour's policy of no early cuts. Cameron promised a fresh start and a "bigger society", whatever that means. Clegg portrayed himself as a break with the two-party system and "something new, something different".

Amidst the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s, with millions concerned for their jobs, the possible loss of their homes and major cuts being made in health, education and other essential social services, the first question chosen by

the panel of journalists was on immigration, the second on law and order.

Brown responded to a question on a "fair and effective" immigration policy by boasting that "net inward migration is falling... because of the action we are taking."

Cameron railed that immigration was "out of control" and pledged to introduce a cap on immigration "so it's in the tens of thousands, not the hundreds of thousands."

Clegg accused the others of "talking tough about immigration, but delivering chaos". He promised to restore exit controls and ensure that immigrants could only come into the country if their skills were needed by employers and they were then assigned a particular geographic region in which they would be allowed to work and live.

A question on how to tackle crime saw Cameron beat the law-and-order drum, decrying too short sentences and insisting that youth who vandalised bus shelters needed custodial sentences.

Brown pledged to guarantee that, under Labour unlike the Tories, "The spending on the police will continue".

Clegg referred three times to "hardened criminals on the run" and prisons functioning as "overcrowded colleges of crime".

This debate on "crime" naturally did not touch upon the criminals that pose the major threat to society—the bankers who have swindled and looted billions. Rather than calls for them to face punishment or custodial sentences, they have been handed the keys to the public purse.

A question on the scandal surrounding MPs' expenses elicited feigned outrage from all concerned and pledges to clean up politics.

When the economic crisis was finally raised, it was framed as to how the parties would slash the state deficit rather than anything even suggesting opposition to cuts.

The debate took on a surreal character. It focused initially on Cameron's opposition to Labour's plans for a small increase in National Insurance, which he denounced as a "tax on jobs". This was rebutted by Brown, who warned that

the Tories' plans to bring in immediate cuts of £6 billion threatened to plunge the economy into a double-dip recession.

Clegg posed as someone taking the moral high ground—telling the truth that cuts were needed and boasting that the Lib-Dems had costed £15 billion of them, unlike their opponents. “These two talk about waste as if we could fill the black hole in public finances by cutting paperclips and pot plants in Whitehall,” he said.

There is some truth in this statement, regardless of Clegg's posturing. Differences over when to begin imposing £6 billion in cuts mask agreement on the need to ultimately slash around £50 billion from public spending. Moreover this figure is dwarfed by the true scale of the measures that will be demanded in the months following the election. The *Financial Times* pointed out, “Ultimately, however, the current fiscal turf war is concentrated on a figure—£6bn—which is dwarfed by the scale of the deficit, at £167bn for this year.”

Ashok Shah, chief investment officer at London Capital, a fund management firm, warned that, following on from Greece, “You must expect more speculative attacks to surface in the market place... The two most likely candidates are Portugal and the UK.”

A question from someone in the Territorial Army asking for assurances that troops will be better equipped and supported allowed Brown, Cameron and Clegg to dress up their support for war in Afghanistan—an occupation opposed by the vast majority of the population—as support for “our boys”.

“Let us remember all those who have lost their lives in Afghanistan,” Brown intoned. “I join Gordon in paying tribute [to] the incredible bravery of what those people do... they are brilliant, brilliant people,” Cameron added.

Clegg called for abandoning plans to replace the Trident nuclear weapons system, only to state that the money saved would be better spent on frontline troops.

There followed vapid exchanges on education, health and social care, distinguished by hypocritical pledges by Blair and Cameron to safeguard the National Health Service. Clegg distinguished himself only by declaring that health provision must face the axe along with every other area of public spending.

A feature of the debate was Brown's repeated efforts to ingratiate himself with Clegg, with statements on seven occasions that “I agree with Nick” and a promise to introduce some form of proportional representation. This indicates Brown's calculation that he will only possibly be able to form a government in alliance with the Lib-Dems.

The possibility of either the Conservatives or Labour forming a majority government appears remote, as both lack

a significant social base for their right-wing, pro-business policies. This has placed Clegg in the hitherto unlikely role as kingmaker.

To this end, most papers not only acknowledged Clegg as the victor on the night, but heaped extraordinary levels of praise upon his anodyne performance.

The *Independent* declared that Clegg “broke the duopoly in British politics... The Liberal Democrat leader seized the moment”.

The *Telegraph* wrote of his “confident performance and mastery of the debate format” giving him “overall victory.”

The *Guardian* editorial focused on his “leaving his two rivals in his wake,” while Patrick Wintour and Polly Curtis spoke of his ability to “change the political landscape” by his “revelatory performance”.

Anyone who witnessed the tortured debate would be baffled by such panegyrics. After all Clegg benefited primarily from not being Gordon Brown or David Cameron.

This response accorded to him is because he is now considered important in the political calculations of the bourgeoisie. The Liberal Democrats are being cultivated for a possible role in government for the first time since the Liberal Labour coalition in 1977, which was used in order to impose cuts dictated by the International Monetary Fund. Its role in a government formed after May 6 would be to impose the far more “savage cuts” to which Clegg is pledged.

The leaders' debate serves to confirm the appraisal made by Britain's Socialist Equality Party in its election manifesto: “This general election is a political fraud. Whatever the make-up of the next government, its agenda has already been determined. The international financial institutions, the major corporations and all the official parties intend to make working people foot the bill for an economic crisis that is not of their making.”

Politics today is monopolised by a fabulously wealthy financial oligarchy, which controls all of the major parties and determines their policies. This situation can only be challenged through the mobilisation of an independent political and social movement of the working class, under the leadership of its own socialist party—one that must of necessity develop outside of the sclerotic structures of the parliamentary system.



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