

Britain's leaders' debate: A fraud in three acts

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The second of three televised debates between the leaders of Britain's main parties was meant to focus on foreign policy, but over half was given over to questions of "general interest". Hosted by Rupert Murdoch's *Sky News*, it succeeded in making the previous debate on domestic policy, broadcast on ITV 1, seem amateurish in its readiness to engage in naked political manipulation and deception.

The affair was summed up by the selection as the second question posed by a "Sky viewer", who asked, "Given our involvement in Afghanistan, if there is another multinational operation to remove Al Qaeda or another terrorist group from a failed state, would the UK participate?"

The Afghan war is opposed by seven out of 10 people in Britain. In the days leading up to the second debate between Gordon Brown for Labour, David Cameron for the Conservatives and Nick Clegg for the Liberal Democrats, a ComRes poll for the *Independent* newspaper found that 77 percent of Britons want British troops home within "a year or so". A second poll found that 70 percent of respondents also feel there is no real choice of policies on Afghanistan between the parties.

The ComRes respondents were right on this—and Murdoch's NewsCorp media empire was determined that the issue was not even to be debated. Instead the Afghan war was reduced to a "given", while Brown, Cameron and Clegg proclaimed their agreement to continue the ongoing occupation and carry out other military adventures wherever this was deemed necessary.

Brown not only answered in the affirmative, but specified where the next engagements would probably be. There were already problems emerging with Al

Qaeda in Somalia and Yemen, he said, and Britain must continue to act internationally to combat this "chain of terror".

Clegg, who is now widely touted as the candidate of "change", expanded on the Liberal Democrats' manifesto pledge to be a "critical supporter" of the Afghan conflict. "The principle of the reason why we went into Afghanistan, why I supported our mission in Afghanistan, unlike the illegal invasion of Iraq, is to keep us safe," he asserted. "So from that principle if we need to do that again we should."

His only caveat in issuing this blank cheque was to make a few populist noises about making sure troops had the right equipment. Cameron spoke in almost identical terms.

Prior to the debate the three leaders had issued written responses on Afghanistan requested by the *Royal United Services Institute Journal*.

Cameron had proclaimed "the ongoing operations in Afghanistan" were "vital to our national security. The strategy which has been in place since the end of last year is, I believe, broadly the right one; we must give it the necessary time and support to succeed."

Brown spoke of Britain's "clear strategy", his raising the defence budget by 10 percent since 1997, and declared that "Labour's commitment to supporting our forces in Afghanistan, and to defence and national security more widely, is non-negotiable."

Clegg merely complained that the European Union was not pulling its weight in Afghanistan.

The dispute that did emerge between the three, over whether or not to replace the Trident submarine nuclear weapons system, was framed entirely as an issue of how best to pursue a militarist agenda.

Clegg has called for the issue of Trident's replacement or otherwise to be made part of an

upcoming Strategic Defence Review. But he did so only on the grounds of whether it was cost-effective, reaffirming his commitment to Britain's retention of nuclear weapons.

Clegg cited a group of retired generals who have warned that replacing Trident could take money away from frontline troops and has said he favours a cruise missile-based nuclear weapons system.

That this position was meant to have incensed Brown and Cameron is mere electoral posturing, allowing Brown to warn of the threat supposedly represented by North Korea and Iran, and Cameron to declare that he agreed with Brown.

The rest of the debate was no better. There was no question at all regarding Iraq, the issue that has defined Britain's foreign policy for almost a decade, or on Britain's collusion with the United States in torture and extraordinary rendition.

Even the loaded reference to Afghanistan was only broached after another carefully selected question kicked off proceedings by asking how the party leaders would tackle "interference" by the European Union. Cameron seized on the occasion to sound all the notes Murdoch wanted to hear, including not handing over powers to Brussels and "standing up for Britain".

Clearly feeling that more airtime was needed for right-wing posturing by the party leaders, Sky even fielded a question on immigration. This was despite immigration being the first question chosen to be asked by ITV in last week's debate on *domestic*, and not foreign policy.

The leaders did not disappoint, with Cameron pledging once again to put a cap on immigration and Brown hailing Labour's achievement in reducing net immigration and declaring that "if you don't have a skill we need, don't come to the country." Clegg stated that the Liberal Democrats would reintroduce exit controls and only allow immigrants into areas where they were needed—provided, he insisted, that they "play by the rules, pay their taxes, [and] speak English".

There were other questions of an almost random character, including what the leaders were "personally" doing "to tackle climate change"—Brown had installed a solar panel, Cameron had got good insulation for his house and Clegg had done nothing much—and whether they would "dissociate themselves" from the Pope when he visits Britain in September. (They would not).

The debate was followed by the inevitable polls on

how the three leaders had fared, with most stating that Clegg had won as he did last week but not by as wide a margin. The issue obsessing the media and the ruling elite is how this will determine the form of the most probable outcome of the election, a coalition government—whether Clegg will eventually partner Brown or Cameron.

Working people have no interest in speculation over the specific make-up of the next parliament. The essential issue is that any governmental combination of these parties will be irrevocably hostile to the essential interests of the working class. Last week Clegg made abundantly clear that he will not act as a restraining force on either Labour or the Tories when it comes to cutting billions from essential services. Rather, he will insist this is carried out. This week he disproved the Liberal Democrats' pretensions to be less militaristic than their rivals. Everything now depends upon workers and young people undertaking the vital task of building their own, socialist party.



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