

Britain's leaders debate on the economy: Evasion, lies and anti-immigrant rhetoric

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The last of three televised debates between Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Conservative David Cameron and Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg was billed as the moment they would finally come clean and tell the electorate the truth: That whichever party, or combination of them, forms a new government after May 6, they will impose harsh austerity measures that go way beyond the “efficiency savings” currently admitted to.

The Institute of Fiscal Studies spelled out what was required. The spending cuts set out by the three are the most severe in a generation, if not since the Second World War. The problem, it complained, was that not only had the party leaders failed to identify just where the axe would fall, but they were misleading the public with talk of protecting “frontline services”.

The IFS report was motivated by fear of the political consequences of such deception, under conditions where what had begun as a banking crisis in 2008 now threatens the bankruptcy of entire countries.

Greece continues to teeter on the brink of insolvency, and the “contagion” has spread to Spain and Portugal which saw their credit ratings downgraded this week. In each of these countries, social democratic governments have brought forward plans to slash spending, jobs and wages in the face of popular opposition.

Britain is just as indebted as Greece and must implement similar measures. The concern is that if the official parties do not admit as much, the agenda of any incoming government will be rejected by many as illegitimate and it will face social unrest.

In the event, the three leaders failed to bite the bullet. There were allusions to economic constraints. But Cameron referred to the situation in Greece only to stress that a Tory government would “never join the euro” and would “keep the pound”. Given that the future of the euro is now on the line, and that sterling has lost more than 25 percent of its value, the only purpose of Cameron’s remarks was to again ingratiate himself with the Murdoch press.

As for Brown, he argued that the “peril” facing Europe’s economies must not be allowed to damage Britain’s “recovery”. This absurd attempt to claim that the UK can be insulated from economic turmoil in Europe was aimed at

justifying Labour’s insistence that its policy of quantitative easing should not be ended immediately, as the Tories suggest.

This difference aside, none of the three admitted to the scale of the cutbacks now being prepared. They all claimed that they would protect health, education and policing. Cameron even suggested that his plans for an additional £6 billion in spending cuts, on top of Labour’s £15 billion, only meant scrapping “glossy” government brochures.

Yet again, the debate was a carefully stage-managed affair with questions vetted in advance.

Questions on the lack of affordable housing and social inequalities in education were met with non-sequiturs. Cameron stated that “discipline” must be the foundation of the education system, while Brown talked of the need to create a new generation of “middle class jobs”—when tens of thousands of doctors, nurses, lecturers and other sections of professionals are to be laid-off.

When a questioner complained of the “grossly unfair” situation in which ordinary people were being made to fund the multi-billion pound bail-out of Britain’s banks, Brown, Cameron and Clegg nodded their heads in agreement and then proceeded to avoid the issue. There was talk of “separating” banks, “recapitalising” them, and the efficacies or otherwise of a banking levy. But none of the three addressed the anti-democratic and profoundly anti-social decision to handover taxpayers’ monies to fund the speculative, and often illegal, activities of the institutions that had brought the country to the brink of financial ruin.

Nor were any proposals made to limit the nefarious activities of the super-rich, the top 1,000 of whom increased their wealth by £77 billion pounds in the last year, largely as a result of the bail-outs. Only Clegg spoke of measures to limit cash bonuses paid to bank bosses to £2,500 in a tilt to public opinion.

This should be contrasted with the unanimity between the three leaders on the need to freeze public sector wages, and “reform”, i.e., dismantle, public sector pensions.

Clegg pressed his proposal for a Council for Financial Stability to be established after the election, comprising the chancellors and vice-chancellors of the three parties, the Bank of England and the Financial Services Authority. He presented this as a means of ensuring all parties “speak from the same

script” regarding the scale of the fiscal crisis and the measures necessary to remedy it. It would only consolidate the de facto coalition between the official parties and the City of London against working people.

The inability of the three leaders to set out their real agendas is the result of what some commentators have taken contemptuously to calling the “Turkeys don’t vote for Christmas” problem. Hence the resort to so-called “dog-whistle” issues—the most spurious of which was the question, “Are politicians aware they have become removed from the concerns of real people, especially on immigration?”

Immigration is the only question that has appeared in all three debates. The fact that it should be posed in a supposed discussion on the economy is indicative of a pathological sickness in the body politic.

It should be seen against the background of the nationalist and racist poison now being consciously spewed out by the European bourgeoisie. From Hungary and France to the UK, the constant attacks on immigrants, asylum seekers and Muslims is aimed at diverting attention from the real cause of the crisis, and dividing working people along racial, religious and national lines.

Complaining that “immigration has been too high, for too long”, Cameron insisted that a Tory government would impose a cap on numbers, despite the fact that some 80 percent of those entering the country are from the European Union.

Clegg condemned Britain’s “utterly chaotic” immigration system, and pledged the Liberal Democrats to re-establish exit controls and dedicated border patrols.

Only the day before the debate, Brown had been involved in the so-called “bigot-gate” scandal, when a pensioner harangued him over the number of immigrants in the country, amongst other complaints. Not realising that he still had his microphone on, Brown was later picked up in private conversation with an aide describing the woman as a “bigot”. With the recording broadcast nationally, he was forced to make a humiliating public apology.

The question gave Brown a chance to try and woo over the bigots once again. It was Brown who last year adopted the British National Party’s slogan of “British jobs for British workers”, and it is the Labour Party that has continuously expressed its concern as to the “genuine” anxieties of the “white working class” over immigration.

In the debate, the prime minister insisted that the task was to “create jobs for people here”, for “people trained in Britain, who have skills in Britain”.

In addition to the diatribes against immigrants came the assault on what the three leaders claimed was a culture of “welfare dependency”.

Cameron said the aim must be to “reward work” and threatened that anyone refusing a job would be barred from receiving unemployment benefit for three years. Brown said there could be “no life on the dole” and stressed that welfare

benefits must be tied to “compulsion”—no “something for nothing anymore”, he said.

Clegg agreed that the aim was “helping people to help themselves” and stipulated that all parties agreed benefits should be “conditional.”

The attempt to brand welfare claimants as idle “spongers” is an insult to the 2.5 million unemployed; a large number of whom have lost their jobs over the past two years as a direct result of the economic crisis precipitated by the banks, hedge fund operators and the Labour government. These are workers, and almost one million young people, for whom there are no jobs available and who are forced to survive on subsistence benefit levels.

It is on this issue that it is possible to identify one of the key objectives behind the demonising of immigrant workers. The constant complaint of big business and the media is that “British” workers are not prepared to work for the same wage rates as those from Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. Brown, Cameron and Clegg made clear that, with an estimated 500,000 to one million jobs to go in the public sector alone over the next period, mass unemployment is to be used to drive down wages and restructure economic and social relations under pain of pauperisation.

Still it was not enough. Writing on the debate in the *Financial Times*, Philip Stephens concluded, “They all flunked it.” All viewers had seen “were three, rather shifty, politicians running away from the truth.”

The *Times* opined that none of the leaders “wanted to confront the pain to come”.

“The implications of such savage, but unfortunately unavoidable, cuts in public services are alarming”, it said. “Last night’s ritual exchange about services that would be made miraculously exempt from reality was a flight of pure fancy.”



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