

BBC debates between Clegg and Farage: A political fraud

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In the run-up to the May 22 European Union (EU) elections, televised debates have been held on Britain's continued membership of the bloc between Liberal Democrat Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage.

The debates are a none-too-subtle piece of political engineering. Clegg was clearly supposed to be able to advance a lucid defence of the EU against Farage, whom he portrayed as a liar and a "little-Englander" looking backwards to a fabled past. At the same time, and with at least equal importance, Farage and UKIP would again be advanced as the only political alternative to the pro-EU consensus of the major parties.

It is a measure of how distant the ruling class and its media are from the concerns and views of working people that success for Clegg was ever seen as the likely outcome of the debate. In the first instance, for Clegg to call anyone a liar is an audacious move. He is almost universally reviled as the man who betrayed every election promise he made in order to go into coalition with the Conservative Party.

More important still, it is a fact that no other politician would have fared much better in the thankless task of defending the EU. It is significant that both Prime Minister David Cameron and Labour Party leader Ed Miliband declined to take part in the debates—one because he fears that a large part of his own party share UKIP's anti-EU agenda and the other because he knew that he would be hammered for opposing a referendum on continued EU membership.

This left Clegg holding a poisoned chalice. Despite the press initially declaring him the winner, Clegg was roundly beaten as far as the public was concerned, with polls registering up to 70 percent of respondents in Farage's favour.

Clegg spoke of the need to reverse "20 years of myth-

making" about the EU, which he claimed was the only way to guarantee jobs and make Britain "richer, stronger, safer." He warned in sonorous tones, "If we cut ourselves off from Europe, our hard-won economic recovery will simply be thrown away." Britain, moreover, would only maintain its "clout" in the world and counter the power of the US and China "by operating through the world's largest economy."

Clegg's problem is that the EU has left most workers "poorer, weaker, less safe" and there has been no economic recovery to throw away. For them, the EU is what it is—an anti-democratic instrument for imposing austerity measures on behalf of the major banks and corporations.

He could make no mention of the savage attacks on social services, mass layoffs and wage cuts that have created social misery in Greece, Spain, Portugal and elsewhere. Nor could he address how democratic rights are under attack across the continent while fascistic parties are on the rise.

This enabled Farage to posture not only as a democrat fighting "the career political class in Westminster" and the "tired status quo defending a crumbling EU," but to make a feint of opposing austerity and to caution against the far right in Greece and France! In addition, he lamented the plight of the "white working class" in Britain, condemned to cheap wages and unemployment brought about by competition from the accession of poorer eastern European countries into the EU.

Farage also opposed the war against Libya and the thwarted plan for war against Syria. Clegg expected to score points over Farage's opposition to the destabilisation of Ukraine, by portraying him as an apologist for Vladimir Putin, and, by extension, for Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Instead Farage was applauded for asserting that the British government was instrumental in getting the EU to "pursue, effectively, an imperialist,

expansionist” foreign policy, which had brought “a false series of hopes to the peoples of western Ukraine, toppled an elected leader and provoked [Russian leader Vladimir] Putin.” The EU had “blood on its hands” in Ukraine and Libya, he declared.

This populist rhetoric, along with the exploiting of fears that immigration is destroying jobs and straining public services, enabled Farage to end his second outing with the appeal to “join the people’s army. Let’s topple the establishment who got us into this mess.”

All of this is a mixture of false promises and outright lies.

UKIP offers nothing for working people seeking to oppose the pro-business agenda of the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour. It is a right-wing party of a section of the ruling elite—one formerly ensconced in the Thatcherite wing of the Conservative Party—that is concerned that British companies are put at a competitive disadvantage globally by “expensive EU regulations” governing labour, health and safety and the environment.

Farage’s “opposition” is to the “euro project” he sees as running contrary to the free market, not to the decimation of jobs and services. He is seeking to defend the City of London, where he began his career trading commodities until his shift out of the Tory Party and into UKIP in 1993. His loud appeals to “freedom”, “self-determination”, “patriotism”, etc., are window dressing for UKIP’s real agenda of cuts in corporation taxes, the abolition of inheritance taxes, a flat rate of income tax, a further £77 billion of public sector cuts and a 40 percent increase in defence spending that can only lead to further social inequality.

He is also, it must be stressed, against the EU because it is from the EU that most immigration occurs. Significantly, though Clegg called Farage a liar for claiming that nearly 500 million EU citizens have “the right” to enter the UK, he then proceeded to engage in an obscene bidding war to prove who could be “toughest” on “foreign workers”.

Farage’s success in the debates has led to warning from the right-wing *Daily Telegraph* that Cameron “should lead the debate on Britain’s membership and not leave it to Nigel Farage and Nick Clegg.”

The prime minister and the dominant sections of the British bourgeoisie are in favour of staying in the EU. But Cameron has been forced to promise an in-out referendum in 2017. This is in part as a means of seeking advantage in negotiations with the EU (he has pledged to use the interim period to renegotiate terms of membership in

Britain’s favour) and in part as an attempt to pacify euro-sceptic backbench MPs.

Forecasts even suggest that the Conservative Party will end up in third place behind the UKIP and Labour on May 22. But a UKIP vote would be, to all intents and purposes, a vote for a right-wing bloc extending deep into the Conservative Party.

As for Labour, Miliband is in agreement with Clegg and Cameron on staying in the EU while calling for the type of “reforms” demanded by big business while it too tries to outdo UKIP on immigration and “action to protect the integrity of the benefits system.”

The Clegg-Farage debate demonstrated the chasm that separates the interests and concerns of the working class from the entire parliamentary setup, including from UKIP.

The Socialist Equality Party in Britain and the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) in Germany are standing candidates in this year’s election for the European Parliament to present a socialist alternative for working people.

We declare in our manifesto:

“Our aim is the establishment of the United Socialist States of Europe. Only the formation of workers’ governments in every country and the unification of Europe on a socialist basis can prevent the decline of Europe into nationalism and war, and create the conditions for utilizing and developing its extensive resources and productive forces in the interests of society as a whole.

“We reject the European Union and all its undemocratic institutions, including the European Parliament. We stand against every form of anti-immigrant chauvinism, racism and nationalism, including the advocacy of separatism in Scotland, Catalonia, Northern Italy and Belgium, that only sows further divisions between workers at a time when united struggle against the common enemy is essential.”



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