

UK party leaders' debate: Pro-business parties discuss how best to impose austerity

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Seven-and-a-half million people tuned into ITV's UK party leaders' debate Thursday night.

Though a highly regulated and stage-managed affair, the debate served to underscore the vast chasm that exists between Britain's ruling elite and the concerns of the broad mass of working people.

This is to be the only televised exchange between party leaders of the entire general election campaign, which ends May 7. It involved Conservative Party Prime Minister David Cameron, Labour's Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democrats, UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage, Nicola Sturgeon of the Scottish National Party (SNP), Leanne Wood of Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales), and the Green Party's Natalie Bennett.

The debate came about after months of haggling in which Cameron in the end insisted that all seven of Britain's largest parties be represented.

Cameron calculated that this would better serve his interests than a more narrowly focussed exchange with Labour and the Liberal Democrats, as took place in 2010.

However, the inclusion of so many candidates points to the continued fracturing of bourgeois politics, with no party able to command the level of support once enjoyed by the Tories and Labour, outside of the narrow and privileged layers on which they are based. Moreover, the fact that three of the newly elected parties are overtly nationalist formations—the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the anti-European UKIP—demonstrates how the competing interests of rival bourgeois cliques threatens to tear the UK apart.

The party leaders were asked four questions: how to cut the deficit, how to provide long - term funding for the National Health Service (NHS), how to “address” immigration, and what they would do for young people.

In framing their answers, the rival political leaders were clearly aware of the deep well of social and political discontent provoked by years of savage attacks on living standards carried out to funnel society's wealth into the coffers of the super-rich. But they also knew that nothing was permissible that in any real way cut across this looting operation.

That is why Cameron insisted on the necessity of continuing with his party's austerity plan, which he said was “working,” leaving the other candidates to pose as critics of Tory “ideologically-motivated” cuts. Even then, they were limited to portraying themselves as advocates of “fairer” cuts, in the case of Miliband and Clegg, or, as with Sturgeon, Wood and Bennett, as supporters of “sensible” increases in public spending to get the economy going again.

Their efforts were entirely unconvincing.

Clegg, for example, began by asking voters to forgive him for breaking his 2010 electoral promise to oppose university tuition fees—abandoned when he formed a coalition with the Tories—before proceeding to speak as if he bore no responsibility for any of the brutal attacks on working people mounted since then.

Miliband's own rhetoric amounted to little more than a promise of “austerity lite,” including the polite suggestion that the super-rich, those with “broad shoulders,” be asked to sacrifice a little to provide some relief to “working people.” What this means in practice is indicated by Miliband having already committed Labour to making an additional £30 billion in cuts over the next five years. His promise to young people to ban zero-hours contracts was left floundering after Wood asked him why Labour voted in the Welsh Assembly against scrapping zero-hours contracts in the care sector.

Sturgeon, Wood and Bennett all posed as being to the

left of Labour, ready to increase public spending to protect the National Health Service and welfare.

Sturgeon was proclaimed the more effective debater because of her readiness to score blows against Cameron and Miliband on this issue. But she also made clear that the SNP is seeking a “progressive alliance” with Labour following the election, which would allow Miliband to impose his planned austerity measures south of the border in return for the SNP being granted the right to implement its own pro-business agenda centring on cutting corporation tax.

Wood never bothered to express any concern over the fate of the bulk of the UK population—peppering her speech with references to using a possible hung parliament to extract some concessions to “the Valleys” she “comes from.”

The debate on immigration saw Labour and the Tories chasing after Farage and UKIP, with Miliband declaring, “I don’t think it’s prejudiced to worry about immigration,” and pledging to bar immigrants from claiming welfare benefits for two years.

Farage was unrestrained in playing to his target audience, spewing forth a noxious stream of xenophobia, blaming the housing crisis on immigrants and the fate of the NHS on people coming to the UK with HIV and seeking retroviral drugs, and denouncing out-of-touch politicians for never having had “a job in their lives”. Farage is a former public school boy and commodity broker.

The exchange on immigration best served to expose how constrained and regulated this central debate of the election campaign truly was. In one exchange, Bennett asked Cameron why the government had taken in only 143 Syrian refugees and was not “taking our fair share...”

No mention was made of the deliberate fostering of civil war in Syria by the UK, in alliance with the United States, or of the grave dangers posed by the aggressive deployment of thousands of NATO troops, tanks and missiles to the very borders of Russia.

The one genuine and unscripted moment of the night came when an audience member, Victoria Prosser, interrupted Cameron as he was pledging to look after members of the armed forces. Prosser pointed out that many former soldiers were now sleeping rough on the streets. Off camera, she was escorted from the studio by seven security guards.

Afterwards, she said, “I gave them nearly a full hour and I found that they were still lying about the issues... I can’t vote for anyone who I know is lying or omitting facts. That means I couldn’t vote for any of the people that I saw tonight.” She added, “They don’t want to answer the toughest questions because they can’t. They can’t answer the questions on why all of their policies benefit those at the top and not the rest of us.”

Millions would echo such sentiments. Official politics operates as a vast conspiracy against the interests of working people.

As the Socialist Equality Party states in its election manifesto, “As in 1914 and 1939, the basic contradictions of the world capitalist system—between globalised production and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states, and between socialised production and private ownership of the means of production—threaten humanity with catastrophe.

“There is no parliamentary solution to this crisis. Whatever party or combination of parties form the next government—Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Scottish National Party (SNP), UK Independence Party (UKIP)—makes no fundamental difference. All are bought-and-paid-for tools of the super-rich, whose primary purpose is to ensure that the voice of working people is silenced. Every major decision will continue to be made on behalf of the only constituency that really counts—the corporate and financial elite.”

The SEP and its candidates, Katie Rhodes in Glasgow Central and David O’Sullivan in Holborn and St Pancras, London, offer a genuine political alternative to all the representatives of big business. We seek to mobilise working people in a unified political struggle against austerity and war through the fight for a workers’ government based on socialist policies.



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