As Tories slip in the polls, British media goes on the offensive against Corbyn

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Monday evening's "Battle for Number 10" televised questioning of Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was an exercise in opinion forming on behalf of Britain's ruling elite.

The broadcast by Sky News and Channel 4 was stage-managed to the nth degree. May and Corbyn were questioned separately for just 20 minutes by a hand-picked audience. Both were then interviewed, also separately, for just 18 minutes each by BBC journalist Jeremy Paxman.

The elaborate pantomime was made necessary because May, like her Tory predecessor David Cameron, refuses to take part in any political debate with her opponents.

Sky declared that the "studio audience has been selected for balance," with one-third Conservative, one-third Labour and one-third undecided. But the questions fielded to the two contenders were hardly "balanced," and Paxman made sure that Corbyn was given a far more hostile grilling than was afforded May.

Corbyn took a question from a person who described himself as from a traditional Labour voting family who had "salt of the earth parents." But it turned out that he was a small businessman who said he could not vote for Corbyn as he was opposed to his "ruthless short-sighted policies" of an increase in Corporation Tax to 26 percent, an end to zero-hour contracts, the introduction of a £10 an hour minimum wage.

Corbyn was for the most part hauled over the coals on the basis that he was for a retreat from Britain's aggressive foreign policy, for being soft on terrorism and a danger to national security.

The first pre-selected question from the audience to Corbyn was why, in the light of last Monday's Manchester bombing, was he prepared to "soften our foreign policy" in the Middle East. The same questioner followed up by asking, "Are you prepared to look the other way if there is any military intervention that is needed in that area to support the coalition that are fighting Islamic State?"

Paxman continued the theme with a series of questions portraying him as a closet communist that was standing on a manifesto he did not believe in. Among the questions put to Corbyn by Paxman was how he could be trusted on the issue of national security and funding the intelligence agencies when his Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell had once called for the disbanding of MI5.

He launched a deranged attack demanding to know if Corbyn would authorise a drone strike against an individual, with 20 minutes notice, on becoming prime minister. Corbyn was chastised for replying, "I would want to know the circumstances."

Paxman's treatment of May was deferential in comparison. Most striking was the fact that whereas Corbyn was accused of being a "friend" of terror groups such as the Irish Republican Army in the 1980s and of Hamas, not a single question was put by Paxman relating to May's responsibility for last week's suicide bombing in Manchester.

May was the Home Secretary for six years, during which Salman Abedi's family worked with Britain's security services in their 2011 regime change operation to depose Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. Within hours of Abedi slaughtering 22 people at Manchester Arena, it was revealed that he was well known to British intelligence and had been allowed to travel freely to Libya and Syria to receive weapons training.

The only reference to the Manchester bombing put to May was from a serving police officer in the audience, who said the event showed the need for more police on the streets and asked May to explain how many more

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she would recruit and how this would be funded.

May, the favoured candidate of the ruling elite and the military, is being built up after suffering significant damage—above all due to her manifesto pledge to force pensioners to sell their homes to pay for elderly care. Pre-election polls had found the Tories up to 25 points ahead. By the day of the bombing, this had declined to between 15 percent and a single-digit lead.

However, to the extent that Paxman was able to score hits on Corbyn, it was by pointing out how often he had repudiated positions he once professed to be issues of principle. Paxman did so to embarrass Corbyn, but Corbyn's answers, evasive as they often were, underscored just how far he has travelled in his capitulation to his party's right-wing since becoming leader. Paxman was able to point out, "In 2013 you said the banks should be in public ownership. That is not in the manifesto?"

Corbyn stressed that what he and McDonnell may have said in the past is well and truly behind them.

Corbyn was asked by host Faisal Islam whether on becoming prime minister he would write "those letters of last resort" to the Trident (nuclear weapons) submarine commanders with instructions on what they should do in the event of Britain being subject to a nuclear strike. He responded, "I will write the appropriate letter to our commanders who are obviously very responsible, very loyal, naval officers."

In reply to the audience member's question accusing him of "softening" UK foreign policy, he took pains to stress that his only aim was "to have a foreign policy that doesn't leave large areas without any effective government—such as in Libya at the present time—which can become a breeding ground for enormous danger for all of us," after which he pledged "to provide 10,000 more police on our streets."

He said Labour, post-Brexit, would "manage" immigration and it would "probably" be no higher than at present and would likely be reduced, as Labour would employ more British workers.

In a cringe-worthy moment, Corbyn responded to a question on why Labour's manifesto did not call for the abolition of the monarchy. Corbyn replied candidly, "Look, there's nothing in there as we're not going to do it... It's not on anybody's agenda, it's certainly not on my agenda and, do you know what, I had a very nice chat with the queen."

Despite every capitulation he has made, the ruling elite in their majority is viciously opposed to a Corbyn-led government lest it serves to inflame, in a deeply socially polarised country, anti-war and anti-austerity sentiment. Indeed so nakedly biased have events such as the "Battle for Number 10" become that sections of the establishment are concerned that this will only fuel support for Corbyn.

The day after the broadcast, the BBC's David Dimbleby spoke out about Corbyn's treatment. Dimbleby is to host a similar May/Corbyn event Friday for his show *Question Time*. In an interview with the *Radio Times*, Dimbleby said, "I don't think anyone could say that Corbyn has had a fair deal at the hands of the press, in a way that the Labour party did when it was more to the centre, but then we generally have a right-wing press." He noted, "The interesting thing is that a lot of Labour supporters really like and believe in the messages that Jeremy Corbyn is bringing across." He added of the Labour right's opposition to Corbyn,"It's not his MPs in the House of Commons necessarily, but there is a lot of support in the country."

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