

## Squeezing Out the Oxygen – or Reviving Democracy?

The History and Future of TV Election Debates in the UK

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## About the Author

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The future of TV election debates in the UK cannot be taken for granted, even though there is strong evidence that, in 2010, they increased the interest and involvement of voters – especially the young and the normally less engaged. Although the expectations, not only of the electorate but also of supporters and opponents alike, are that such debates are now here to stay, many of the hurdles – which left Britain as one of the last democratic countries in the world to introduce them – remain in place, with some new added complications.

Analysis of the twelve British general election campaigns after the 1960 US presidential encounter between Nixon and Kennedy point to a clear pattern of why they did not happen in the UK for fifty years, despite the fact that all the major parties – albeit at different times – spoke up in favour. Though, in public, the reluctant party leaders cited largely constitutional reasons – in particular, that debates are not appropriate for a non-presidential parliamentary system of government – their more candid considerations focused squarely on political self-interest. Either incumbency or a substantial opinion poll lead – or both – always meant agreeing to debates presented too high a risk for one or other of the parties.

This pattern was only broken in 2010 because – for once – both the largest UK political parties concluded there was electoral advantage in debates and – also for the first time – the main broadcasters worked closely together to overcome the significant practical obstacles. So although the political cost of veto-ing future debates may now be higher, the real difficulties in repeating what were widely, though not universally, acknowledged as a successful innovation, may prove to be no less challenging than they were for the previous half century. The new Westminster context of coalition government is only the most obvious of the changed circumstances which risk the immediate future of debates, as political parties each assess the impact on their electoral prospects. International experience – including from the United States – suggests that just because debates have happened once, it is far from certain they will be here next time round.

Meanwhile, the debate about debates – between those who argue that they “squeezed the oxygen” from the 2010 campaign and those who claim they invigorated democratic engagement within key parts of the electorate – is likely to continue. Proponents of debates will have to keep reminding the political establishment and voters, as well as some academic and media sceptics, that – for a short while at least in 2010 – apathy towards politics seemed to have met its match in enthusiasm for the UK’s first televised election debates.

## **PREFACE**

Attempting to sit down and write anything sensible or interesting whilst simultaneously wearing several different hats is a precarious business. The opportunity a Reuters Fellowship offers to step back with a level of detachment and a more academic environment brings with it a potential hazard in being clear and transparent about the perspective from which this paper is written. As one of the negotiators setting up the 2010 election debates, I cannot pretend to be approaching this topic as a disinterested or purely academic observer – I was part of the process. So although much that is contained in this study is, of course, properly grounded in sources which are public and on the record, it is also informed by my own first-hand experience and interactions with other participants, some of which, inevitably, must remain confidential. It is also important to make clear that the paper – especially Chapter 4 – was completed before any possible future negotiations regarding debates for a 2015 election.

In addition, the day-job of being the BBC's Chief Political Adviser does not allow me to step outside, even temporarily, from the bracing – and sometimes abrasive – territory which exists between the BBC and politicians. Because defining and interpreting political impartiality and independence is a central task of that ongoing role, this paper is written from a perspective which is consistent with the BBC's journalistic approach. That means taking a particular stance on broadcasting and programmes is appropriate – taking one on politics or politicians is not. This paper is categorically not a BBC view of the debates, past, present or future. Rather, it represents only an individual insight from someone fortunate enough to have the double benefit of involvement in an historic moment for both politics and television as well as the luxury of a little time in a nourishing environment for reflection.

Ric Bailey, February 2012

## Introduction

*Of all the thousands of hours of TV broadcast in 2010, the most high-profile, memorable and, in retrospect, poignant ...<sup>1</sup>  
... game-changing events ...<sup>2</sup>  
... compulsive and unmissable ... gawp at history being born.<sup>3</sup>*

Who would have thought that an aspect of national life regarded as so mired in apathy, cynicism, anger and scandal would attract such a reaction? Yet these reviews were – astonishingly – about a series of programmes which, if only for a few weeks, seemed to have transformed the relationship between people and politics. Four and a half hours across peak-time schedules, discussing subjects ranging from papal attitudes towards science to manufacturing subsidies in the West Midlands, seen – at least in part – by more than two-thirds of the people about to vote in the UK General Election.

That the 2010 Prime Ministerial TV Debates had a seismic impact on the election campaign, on the media, on politicians and on the electorate is for many beyond argument (less certain was their effect on the result). According to the long-time election observers, Kavanagh and Cowley, the debates ‘completely changed the rhythm and feel of the national campaign’.<sup>4</sup> One survey claimed that nearly 90% of those who saw them discussed the debates with others.<sup>5</sup> There was, it is said, a ‘special relationship’ between the debates and the youngest voters who then turned out at polling stations at a significantly increased rate compared to older voters.<sup>6</sup> Andy Murray may not have been a typical 22 year old, but he too was caught up: ‘the TV debates got me hooked ... I was loving it’.<sup>7</sup> The debates were accompanied by an ‘unprecedented sharing of thoughts and opinions about politics’ through the new social networking phenomenon of watching them on one screen whilst simultaneously talking about them with friends on another.<sup>8</sup> ‘People were talking about the debates in workplaces, schools and online’, according to one of the world’s top debaters, ‘In a country which never had televised debates, it is now unthinkable that we should conduct a campaign without them.’<sup>9</sup>

The praise was not universal. The historian Andrew Roberts, in accepting their permanence, saw them, unambiguously, as a ‘malign move’, with Britain now ‘lost to the presidential system’.<sup>10</sup> Another academic describes them as ‘bad for politics and awful for governance’.<sup>11</sup> The political columnist Steve Richards claims they are ‘dangerous’.<sup>12</sup> And there has been a vigorous bout of internal argument (largely below the national media radar) in Conservative circles about how far the debates contributed to David Cameron’s failure to win a Commons majority and whether agreeing to them was a strategic error.

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<sup>1</sup> Caitlin Moran, ‘This Year Politics was Blockbuster TV’, *The Times*, 18 Dec. 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Kellner, ‘Is there a Progressive Majority?’, YouGov Commentary, 24 Mar. 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Parsons, ‘Epic? The Leaders’s Debate was Bigger than Princess Di’s Wedding or England Playing a World Cup Semi-Final’, *Daily Mirror*, 16 Apr. 2010

<sup>4</sup> Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), preface.

<sup>5</sup> YouGov survey for Stephen Coleman (ed.), *Leaders in the Living Room* (RISJ, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Jay G. Blumler, ‘Voters’ Responses to the Prime Ministerial Debates’, in Coleman, *Leaders in the Living Room* (RISJ, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted *Independent on Sunday*, 5 May 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Nic Newman, *#UKelection2010: Mainstream Media and the Role of the Internet* (RISJ, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Neill Harvey-Smith, ‘UK Election Debate Epilogue’, Election Debates website, 19 June 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Roberts, ‘2010 The Great Debate Election’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 9 May 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Azeem Ibrahim, Research Fellow Harvard (Kennedy School and Institute of Social Policy Understanding), Huffpost World website, 8 Mar. 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Steve Richards, interview, 25 Jan. 2011.

On both sides, though, there seems to be a broad assumption that debates are here to stay, a feature now etched into the electoral landscape of the UK. In public at least, the large UK parties themselves seem to be committed to them in principle. But just how far entrenched are election debates? Is the assumption that they are here to stay justified? Is there still an argument that they trivialise the importance of an election, reducing it to ‘X-Factor’ politics? Or that they are inappropriate for our parliamentary system of government? Could a future would-be Prime Minister now decline an invitation to take part? In short, *should* they be a permanent part of our democracy – and, if so, have the obstacles which kept them off our screens for half a century now finally been removed?

This report looks at why it took the UK so long to introduce election debates, analysing the 12 general elections which followed the Nixon–Kennedy confrontations when the debate over debates in the UK began. It looks – from a first-hand perspective – at how that impasse was broken at the 2010 general election. It assesses the arguments of those who complain that the impact of the debates was not so beneficial – that it ‘sucked the oxygen’<sup>13</sup> from the election campaign and accelerated the move towards a ‘presidential’ system of government, alien to the UK. Finally, it casts ahead to the potential context for the next election, exploring whether the difficulties just overcome may yet re-emerge and whether there may be new hurdles for supporters of election debates.

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Rawnsley, *The End of the Party* (Penguin, 2010).

# 1. Why there were No TV Debates in the UK for 50 Years

## 1.1. *Too Trivial, Too American*

Ever since the contrasting images of Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice-President Richard M. Nixon became the template for winners and losers in gladiatorial politics, the UK associated election debates with the United States and with Presidents. It did not, by and large, give much attention to Australia, to Canada or to New Zealand, all with parliamentary systems based on Westminster and all with some decades experiencing election debates. Nor did the UK concern itself for too long with elections in Germany, the Netherlands or Norway, some of its many European neighbours where debates are part of the electoral furniture. It wasn't even much embarrassed by the fact that Iran, Mongolia and Afghanistan had already decided that their elections would be enhanced by TV election debates. Added to this was the perception of television itself – a byword among many in the political classes (who don't watch it much) for shallowness and vulgarity, with its ever-reducing sound-bites, its game-show culture, and its preference for image over substance.

So the first stirrings of the debate about debates – from 1960 – were heavily overlaid with the implication that, if the UK followed where the United States had led, it would be a further erosion of our parliamentary democracy – the 'presidentialisation', the 'Americanisation' of our politics and, perhaps even worse, the transformation of our democracy into light entertainment. It was perfectly characterised at the very first UK general election after the iconic Nixon–Kennedy encounters, when the opposition leader Harold Wilson challenged the Conservative Prime Minister to give Britain's voters a similar opportunity. It would, replied Sir Alec Douglas Home, turn the election into a 'sort of Top of the Pops contest'<sup>14</sup> (for which, in the 21st century, read X-Factor or Pop Idol). Might history have been different if his Tory predecessor, Harold Macmillan, had still been the incumbent? 'We old dogs have to learn new tricks',<sup>15</sup> he had told a dinner celebrating a quarter century of TV in 1961, soon after meeting – and clicking with – President Kennedy.

Macmillan's successor did not feel the same about embracing the young medium and against this background, a dozen general elections came and went without televised debates between the party leaders, even though all of the UK's major political parties said they supported the idea. The snag was, they never all called for them – and meant it – at the same time. It is no criticism of party politicians to say that their priority in an election campaign is, on the whole, to win, or at least to maximise their results. They also appreciated from the start that televised election debates would have the potential to transform a campaign in unpredictable ways. So the chances of all the key parties believing – at the same election – that debates would improve their own electoral prospects were always quite low. It would need either a very particular set of circumstances or for one participant to make a fundamental miscalculation – as Nixon's own advisers believed he had done in accepting Kennedy's challenge. The Vice-President's own press secretary admitted his 'mouth dropped open' when Nixon suddenly announced in a news conference that he would take part. 'I could attribute his reversal', said

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Robin Day on *Panorama*, Oct. 1963, BBC.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Sheila Bailey: 'A Prime Minister Who Learnt to Use Television', Birth Television Archive: [www.birth-of-tv.org/birth/assetView.do?asset=1413260435](http://www.birth-of-tv.org/birth/assetView.do?asset=1413260435).

Herbert G. Klein, 'only to the fact that he did not want his manhood sullied by appearing as if he were afraid to debate his opponent face-to-face and he was confident that he could win such an encounter.'<sup>16</sup>

But accepting debates in principle was, in any case, only first base. It marked the starting point for wrangling over detail and practicalities which presented many genuinely difficult problems. For parties which felt there was no electoral advantage to debates, but were embarrassed to say so in public, those difficulties were often sufficient to present a convenient opportunity for scuppering negotiations without losing too much political face. At each of the UK general elections between 1964 and 2005, it is possible to see two parallel sets of arguments employed – sometimes by one party, sometimes by another – to explain why televised debates did not happen. The first are those expressed in public, which generally emanate from the notion that such debates are alien to the UK and its system of government, or that they trivialise the electoral process. The second are those used in private – and sometimes later, more candidly, after the event in memoirs, interviews and published diaries – which centre on political realities and, inevitably, self-interest. These more authentic explanations are characterised in two ways: first, most incumbent Prime Ministers are reluctant to give a 'leg up' to their opponents by granting them the equal standing a debate usually bestows; second, any party with a substantial lead in the opinion polls and a reasonable expectation of victory feels disinclined to put that at risk through what they fear is the lottery of debates.

There is also, of course, an element of gamesmanship to take into account, which means that sometimes those politicians who are calling for debates do not necessarily really want them to happen. In other words, whether there should or should not be debates can itself be an element of the party-political nature of the build-up to elections. It is the very time when politicians are normally seeking to emphasise their differences and when necessary cooperation between parties – to achieve the common goal of appearing together with an agreed format – is hardest to achieve. (The more obvious route – of trying to organise debates years ahead of election periods – is the least appealing for political parties, who are unwilling to commit to a strategy for as yet unknown circumstances.) Add to this the increasing complexity of the political geography, with different combinations of parties across different parts of the UK and it soon does not seem so surprising that, for all the talk, British broadcasters had failed utterly in their attempts to achieve what most of their international colleagues were – well before the turn of the century – beginning to see as a routine part of their election campaigns.

## 1.2. *Dusty Pipes, Political Cobwebs*

British television had got off to a rather slow start with political coverage generally. If the Nixon–Kennedy debates of 1960 did not persuade Sir Alec Douglas Home that he should take part in a British version at the following 1964 election, he was hardly defying any long-standing culture of electoral engagement in UK broadcasting. When the previous campaign, in 1959, was described as the first 'television election', it really was: in the four years after 1955, the number of households with televisions increased from 38% to more

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates: Fifty Years of High-Risk TV*, 2nd edn (Columbia University Press, 2008).

than 70%. More strikingly, before 1959, all references to politics on television (apart from the parties' own broadcasts) were actually banned during the campaign – certainly the safest way of maintaining 'impartiality'. If that seems extraordinary to modern ears, it was in a context where, until 1957, broadcasters had not been allowed to report on politics, even outside election periods, if the issues were to be debated in Parliament during the following fourteen days (which, as parliamentary business was only scheduled a week in advance, in effect prevented broadcast coverage of most current affairs). So British broadcast journalism had not dared to do elections before – something the incoming BBC Director General, Sir Hugh Greene, described as 'a tremendous abdication of responsibility on the part of the BBC'.<sup>17</sup> But if the broadcasters' first attempts at election coverage were timid, they did at least establish the notion that debate is central to political competition. Both the BBC and the infant Independent Television were more inclined to pitch the politicians against each other than to risk their own journalism. Granada's *Election Marathon* (viewed by some as potentially illegal) offered all 348 candidates in its area one minute each on air, with another minute's reply. They went ahead only where all the candidates in a constituency agreed to take part. Altogether, more than 230 candidates were able to broadcast for a total of nearly 12 hours – a marathon indeed, but a landmark too. The BBC's *Hustings*, also regional, involved discussion between candidates nominated by their parties and questions from an audience – which had also been nominated by the parties. They were, apparently, both lively and rather gladiatorial. The nearest programme to a Leaders' Debate involving the electorate was another Granada innovation, *The Last Debate*, featuring Selwyn Lloyd, Barbara Castle and Arthur Holt,<sup>18</sup> who each delivered short speeches and then answered audience questions. It was an early warning to the political hierarchies of what can happen when voters themselves are allowed to take part: 'the audience interrupted and heckled on such a scale that at times the speakers were shouting to try to make themselves heard'.<sup>19</sup> As a direct result, anxiety about live audiences was embedded in the parties' psyche from an early stage – and there was nothing similar for more than a decade. The party leaders themselves, however, were far more protected in the first 'television election', largely confining themselves to the parties' own broadcasts and never being interrogated either by journalists or public.

By contrast, the US had a long tradition of debates before 1960. The confrontations between Nixon and Kennedy may have been ground-breaking television, but they were frequently and solemnly placed firmly in their historical context, the latest manifestation of a tradition tracking back to the democracy-defining series of senatorial debates conducted between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas more than a hundred years earlier. It may not even have been coincidence that both kicked off in Illinois.

It is scarcely surprising, then, that Britain was not ready to follow the US lead on debates by 1964: in both political and media culture, it still remained closer to the nineteenth than the twenty-first century, with the cobwebs of the '14-Day Rule' and pre-ITV deference only just beginning to be swept away by the new era of *That Was The Week That Was*. For the newly elected Leader of the Opposition, 48-year-old Harold Wilson – who had

<sup>17</sup> David Butler and Anthony King, *The British General Election of 1964* (Nuffield Studies, Macmillan, 1965).

<sup>18</sup> Selwyn Lloyd, Conservative MP for Wirral, Foreign Secretary 1955–60; Barbara Castle, Labour MP for Blackburn, Parliamentary Private Secretary to Harold Wilson 1959; Arthur Holt: Liberal MP for Bolton West, subsequently Chief Whip and Party President.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Trenaman and Denis McQuail, *Television and the Political Image* (Methuen, 1961).

recently identified himself with modernity and technology through talk of the 'white heat of this revolution' – there was the prospect of political advantage in challenging the 60-year-old '14th Earl of Home' to an election debate. In private, though, 'the 14th Mr Wilson' (as Sir Alec sardonically referred to him) was rather less enthusiastic: 'I was none too keen on the debates. Some small thing might have gone wrong. I might have got hiccups from smoking a dusty pipe ...'<sup>20</sup>

By the time the challenge was made, such discussions as there were around the BBC's proposal for a 'confrontation' between the leaders had already foundered. As Butler and King put it: 'parties accepted confrontation in principle while rejecting it in practice ... all parties found their fears more compelling than their hopes'.<sup>21</sup> The party leaders did, however, appear over three evenings just before the dissolution of Parliament on an innovative simultaneous TV and radio programme called *Election Forum*. Home and Wilson for half an hour each and the Liberal leader, Jo Grimond, for 20 minutes, took questions sent in on postcards (18,000 of them) which were put to them by three journalists, including Robin Day. Those who were to be concerned in 2010 that debates may not allow subjects to be looked at in sufficient depth might reflect that, in 1964, Harold Wilson dealt with 21 subjects in his 30 minutes – Sir Alec Douglas Home managed 28. It was reported that 'all three leaders escaped with some manifestly inadequate answers'.<sup>22</sup>

### 1.3. Grammar School Premiers – With No Debating Society

Against this background, by 1966, the incumbent Prime Minister was not willing to concede the advantages of office to the new opposition leader and fellow grammar school boy, Ted Heath. Wilson's political secretary, Marcia Falkender, later spelt out the political reality in more candid terms than most: 'To appear with Heath on TV would have been giving him a lot of exposure as a potential prime minister and Harold's office would in fact have rubbed off on Heath. Harold decided that was not going to happen.'<sup>23</sup>

That did not mean, however, that there were no negotiations, nor that the party leaders, including the Prime Minister, did not accept the principle of a 'confrontation'. On the evening the election was announced, ITV extracted agreement from the three main leaders. None wanted to be seen opposing the idea of debate – a Gallup poll during the campaign suggested 69% of the electorate were in favour. Ted Heath issued repeated challenges, but was against a 'tri-angular tea-party', rejecting any idea of the Liberal leader, Jo Grimond, taking part as an equal. Harold Wilson insisted he must. Mr Grimond himself refused any formula which demoted him from equal status. Not for the last time, the two broadcasters themselves didn't help, with their 'self-defeating and somewhat inappropriate jockeying for position', not to mention a 'rather casual approach'.<sup>24</sup>

If agreement on debates was never very likely in 1966, it was a dead certainty that 1970 would draw a blank. Relations between the parties – especially Labour – and the broadcasters – especially the BBC – were as poor as they would ever be, at least until the end of the century. Harold Wilson

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Michael Cockerell, 'Why 2010 will See the First TV Leaders' Election Debate', BBC News Online, 10 Apr. 2010: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/election\\_2010/8612153.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/8612153.stm).

<sup>21</sup> Butler and King, *British General Election of 1964* (1965).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Cockerell, 'First TV Leaders' Election Debate' (2010).

<sup>24</sup> Butler and King, *British General Election* (1965).

ruled out 'confrontations' well before the campaign – not just for himself, but in a way which actively discouraged other ministers from debating with their counterparts. This probably marked the high-water mark of the influence exerted by the Committee on Party Political Broadcasting, representing the three large parties and the two main broadcasters. Though it was primarily responsible for the parties' own election broadcast negotiations, it also discussed editorial coverage. Whether or not it took formal decisions was disputed, but the sway it still maintained over the broadcasters' own coverage of the election now seems extraordinary to anyone who assumes that political independence has always been a key characteristic of UK broadcasting. After three elections in which television had made some progress towards more political discussion, 1970 marked a clear backward step: no live audiences (the shadow of Barbara Castle and Selwyn Lloyd still stretched from 1959, though it was the Liberals who were most opposed by 1970); no Sunday programmes (one did sneak through, with a live audience at that, but only because it was made by the Religious Broadcasting Department); and most jolting for those charged now with guarding against political interference, 'full consultation over both invitations to speakers and choice of constituencies for survey'.<sup>25</sup> Newly launched BBC local radio stations were often stymied in their attempts to introduce more imaginative election coverage, such as Radio Sheffield's plan to use a live panel of younger voters ('too unrepresentative'). At its core, the lack of trust between politicians and broadcasters meant any notion of debates between the party leaders was as far away in 1970 as it had ever been; there was not even now a pattern to follow from the United States, which was a decade into its 16 years without any presidential election debates. As Martin Harrison rather understated it in his post-election analysis, 'it could become all too easy to forget that political broadcasting does not exist for producers or politicians but for the ordinary citizen'. Before the next election, broadcasters had to 'grapple with the delicate task of improving relations with the politicians but without in the process eroding their hard-won traditions of independence'.<sup>26</sup>

If relations were a little less raw by 1974, it did not make a debate any more likely. Perhaps too much else was happening. Two elections, two experienced party leaders and a nation in crisis: neither Heath nor Wilson had demonstrated any enthusiasm for debates. But the profile of these leaders casts a revealing perspective on the continuing narrative of the 'presidentialisation' of British elections. In February 1974, television and radio coverage of the election was dominated by the party leaders, who invariably appeared at the morning press conferences and overshadowed their colleagues. Both Heath and Wilson featured in more than 90% of bulletins during the campaign, with Jeremy Thorpe not far behind. Heath took 60% of all the Conservative time, Wilson 59% of Labour's – and Thorpe 69% of the Liberals'.<sup>27</sup> Yet it was noted that at this election these proportions marked a slight decline in the leaders' dominance since 1970. So if opponents of debates – then and now – worry about a shift towards 'presidentialisation', insofar as such leader dominance can be considered a measure, that fear had already long been realised – without debates (see Chapter 3).

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<sup>25</sup> David Butler and Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, *The British General Election of 1970* (Macmillan, 1971).

<sup>26</sup> Martin Harrison, 'Election on the Air', *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Martin Harrison, 'Television and Radio', in David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of February* (Macmillan, 1974).

#### 1.4. *Tempting – But a Loser’s Trick*

In 1979, antipathy towards any suggestion of presidential government became the public explanation for resisting debates, despite one historic development: for the first time, a serving Prime Minister spoke out in favour and threw down the gauntlet. James Callaghan’s Labour Party were behind in the polls, Margaret Thatcher was fighting her first general election as leader – theoretically, at least, the most promising combination of circumstances favouring election debates. The idea had been floated by Downing Street and taken up by ITV’s *Weekend World* just before the campaign began. The tabloids weighed in, with a *Sun* headline on 3 April: ‘TAKE HIM ON MAGGIE!’

Initially, Mrs Thatcher was tempted to accept the challenge but there was united opposition from three key colleagues: Lord Thorneycroft, Willie Whitelaw, and, crucially, her media adviser, Gordon Reece.<sup>28</sup> They feared that debates would dominate the whole election: ‘All the news stories would be about the preparations for the meeting and the detailed arrangements: and the outcome ... would be seen as deciding the election.’<sup>29</sup> The Conservative strategists wanted the election to be about the travails of the previous winter – not about a TV programme. If this concern found an echo 30 years later it was not the only one. The presence of a new Liberal leader, David Steel, was also preying on the calculations – any rise in third-party support, they surmised, would almost certainly be more at the expense of the Tories than Labour. What’s more, the polls carried a double-edged message: on the one hand, the Conservative lead was too comfortable to risk; on the other, ‘Uncle Jim’ was significantly ahead of ‘Maggie’ in personal ratings: ‘If this was a presidential election, there would be no doubt about the outcome.’<sup>30</sup> All these private considerations could not, of course, be put forward as the public explanation for Mrs Thatcher’s decision to turn down *Weekend World*’s invitation. She wrote back to LWT, saying ‘I believe that issues and policies decide elections, not personalities. We should stick to that approach. We are not electing a President. We are choosing a government.’<sup>31</sup>

If ‘presidential’ is intended as a description for a political system which focuses attention on the personalities of the party leaders, then Mrs Thatcher’s contribution to the genre is second to none. Her dominance – together with clear opinion poll leads – guaranteed that there would be little talk of television debates throughout the 1980s. In fact, if there was one distinctive feature of the 1983 campaign, it was that the Leader of the Opposition, Michael Foot, did not even issue the customary challenge to the incumbent. A ‘confrontation’ was suggested – by the BBC’s *Panorama* – and quickly rejected some three months before the election. By 1987, the ‘presidential’ boot was on the other foot – but with similar consequences for the prospects of a debate, which was barely mentioned. Labour’s campaign – for the first time under the influence of Peter Mandelson – focused heavily on the personality of Neil Kinnock in the ground-breaking Hugh Hudson party election broadcast. Mrs Thatcher’s clear opposition to any change in the ‘traditional broadcasting arrangements’ (as she had quaintly put it) and Labour’s new determination to exercise more control over media exposure, combined with a more compelling reason for the two largest parties to dismiss any suggestion of a

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<sup>28</sup> Lord (Peter) Thorneycroft, Conservative Party Chairman, 1975–81; William Whitelaw, Conservative MP for Penrith and the Border, Deputy Party Leader 1975–9; Gordon Reece, Conservative Director of Publicity 1978–80.

<sup>29</sup> Butler and Kavanagh, *British General Election* (1979).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>31</sup> Cockerell, ‘First TV Leaders’ Election Debate’ (2010).

televised 'confrontation'. By now, there was clearly a third force – the Alliance had won a share of the vote in 1983 within two and a half percentage points of Labour. Strategists from neither of the big two parties would wish to confer the enhanced status a debate would offer. And perhaps even the most enthusiastic and adept member of the Union of Prime Ministerial Debate Negotiators would have balked at finding an agreed format which took account of the joint leadership of the two Davids – Steel and Owen.

Since 1960, then, the two most telling factors which dictated – in theory at least – against televised election debates had been a well ensconced incumbent Prime Minister and/or one of the political parties being well ahead in the opinion polls. So a cautious bookmaker, approaching the 1992 campaign, might have been well advised to shorten the odds. John Major had not long replaced Mrs Thatcher as Conservative leader and Prime Minister; the polls put the two largest parties neck and neck. This was a rare election in which the advantages of incumbency were rather less than normal – the Leader of the Opposition was better known and more established than the Prime Minister – and neither party would be risking the loss of an opinion poll lead. But there were other political factors at play. On the 'presidential' scale, it seemed that one of the qualities which had most attracted Conservative backbenchers to the new Prime Minister was that he was not a 'personality' politician like his predecessor. There was much talk of a resurgence of Cabinet government and a re-establishment of the notion of 'first among equals' (notwithstanding a party election broadcast drawing on the Hugh Hudson model, on the lines of 'Major – the Movie', taking the Prime Minister on a tour of his Brixton roots). But televised election debates were not, in 1992, a natural fit for the political mood – nor, it must be said, would they have been seen as playing to John Major's strengths. This certainly encouraged Labour (to mingle the sporting metaphors) in playing the traditional opposition card of throwing down the gauntlet. If nothing else, Major's knowing response was an indication that he had more confidence about the outcome of the election than many in the political and media establishment: 'Every party politician that expects to lose tries that trick of debates and every politician who expects to win says no ...'<sup>32</sup>

### *1.5. 'Missed Opportunity of Epic Proportions'*

By 1997, it was John Major's turn to try the 'trick'. Consistent in his analysis, if not in his attitude to the worth of debates, the Prime Minister – this time with an expectation of electoral defeat – decided that he too now favoured a confrontation. The response from Tony Blair (or at least his spokesman): 'Fine: his record against our policies, any time, any place.'<sup>33</sup> This was the moment it appeared that debates came tantalisingly close, with discussions seeming to make more progress than at any election until 2010, when the successful negotiators studied carefully what happened in 1997 and drew on a number of key lessons. Just as James Callaghan nearly 20 years earlier had looked at the polls and realised he needed a 'game-changer', John Major found little difficulty in reversing his hostility. On announcing the election, he said that a televised discussion with Tony Blair would 'enhance the democratic process',

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<sup>32</sup> John Major, House of Commons, Hansard (at Prime Minister's Question Time answering Ken Livingstone), 12 Mar. 1992.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Castle and Louise Jury, 'Major and Blair Poised for Head-to-Head Debate on TV', *Independent*, 2 Mar. 1997.

provided it was 'a responsible, long and detailed debate'. His backbenchers banged their desks with approval when he told them, on the eve of the campaign, that he was 'relishing the chance to take part in a debate and pin down Blair on the detail of Labour's policies'.<sup>34</sup>

Major's position illustrates perfectly the political paradox of TV election debates and mirrors that of his Labour predecessor in 1979: being for or against debates is squarely a matter of tactical political advantage; navigating between those two opposing stances requires the ability to deploy parallel arguments about the relationship between television and politics. What was a 'trick' in 1992 would 'enhance the democratic process' by 1997. This conversion, it would seem, came very late in the day. In January 1997, an internal BBC memo had indicated that the Prime Minister was still opposed to any debate: 'We have had an informal indication from the Prime Minister that he has a strong preference for long one-on-one interviews during the campaign, and is ill-disposed towards a debate – whatever the format. But we know that some of his advisers are keen that he should do it.'<sup>35</sup> Callaghan had also made it clear, less than a year before the 1979 election, that he too was against a 'confrontation'. Gordon Brown, when challenged by David Cameron in the Commons in 2008, stuck to the formula established by Thatcher and Blair – that TV debates were not part of the British way.

But all three managed to perform a 180 degree turn in the 12 months before polling day. The final political calculation made by Callaghan in 1979, Major in 1997 and Brown in 2009 was remarkably similar. Each, as incumbent Prime Minister, felt they had a firmer grasp of the detail of policy; each faced a Leader of the Opposition who was not only ahead in the polls, but who they regarded as a shallow 'sound-bite' politician; each believed that debates would confirm them as the best Prime Minister through a demonstration of superior understanding and range, exposing their opponent as thin on policy, long on image. (The equation in 1979 was additionally complicated by conflicting predictions of how the electorate would regard the prospect of a woman prime minister.)

Less charismatic and 'TV-friendly' as Major was than Blair and as Brown was than Cameron, both Prime Ministers were confident that a format which involved 'long and detailed' discussion of policy would play to their advantage. This belief was central to their negotiating strategies – concluded successfully in 2010, but resulting in failure in 1997. It led to two particular sticking points in 1997 – the status of the Liberal Democrat leader, Paddy Ashdown, and the role of the audience. The internal BBC memo in January had identified the first of these as the 'key issue', saying that John Major had 'indicated informally that he would be unwilling to take part in a debate that included Paddy Ashdown'. In this period, the Liberal Democrats occupied barely one-third the number of seats at Westminster they had in the run-up to 2010, but both the BBC and ITV had legal advice making it clear Ashdown could not be excluded. Each came up with a formula aimed at accommodating this conundrum, involving two-way debates between Major and Blair, together with a stand-alone interview with Ashdown. The BBC's consisted of two half-hour question and answer sessions between Major and Blair, strictly stop-watched, with a total of six topics for nine minutes each. All three leaders would make closing statements. Major's Director of Communications, Charles Lewington, told the corporation's correspondent,

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<sup>34</sup> David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

<sup>35</sup> Anne Sloman, 'Party Leader Debates', internal memorandum, BBC Archive, 9 Jan. 1997.

Nicholas Jones, that his boss thought the BBC's format was too rigid: 'he believes the programme would give Blair too many opportunities to trot out his soundbites'.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Labour preferred the not much different ITV formulation as well. The broadcasters were also struggling to find a compromise on the studio audience. The Conservatives feared Blair would play to the gallery; Labour portrayed this as Tory aloofness from ordinary people.

What was clear, though, was that the discussion around debates was becoming embroiled in party politics. When the Liberal Democrats heard about the formats proposed, they too dug in, with Lord Richard Holme, the campaign director, refusing to allow Paddy Ashdown to be 'confined to a corner'.<sup>37</sup> Charles Kennedy, with an eye to recruiting for the cause the nationalists in Scotland and Wales, said that the broadcasters would find themselves 'in a legal minefield' if they tried to 'impose a two party debate on the whole of the United Kingdom'.<sup>38</sup> In a letter to the BBC's Director-General, John Birt, on 17 March, Lord Holme was more diplomatic – 'let me emphasise that we are anxious to sort this out without resort to legal proceedings' – but the message was clear. In fact, by then, the BBC was confident that the format proposed – Lib Dem inclusion, but not equality, separate and complementary debates among leaders in Scotland and Wales – would withstand legal challenge.

Peter Mandelson also wrote to John Birt the same day – and began encouragingly: 'We are delighted that the Prime Minister has now agreed to ... a debate and hope very much it is possible to arrange a programme that allows the issues at the centre of the campaign to be properly aired and debated.' However, he went on to reject the format, the number of debates, the proposed duration, the rigidity, the lack of representation of 'minor parties', the make-up of the interview panel, the inability of the audience to put questions and, to cap it all, despite demanding shorter debates, put forward a list of five extra topics which should be included. He also insisted that all the details of staging – podium style and height, lighting, position of panel and audience – would be a matter for 'our detailed agreement'. This letter – something of a contrast to his strategy in 2009 – was dated 17 March 1997. Alastair Campbell's diaries, only recently released, now cast an interesting perspective on the chronology. On 3 March, they reveal that Tony Blair 'suddenly said' (privately, during a car journey) that he didn't think a TV debate would be in Labour's interests and that Gordon Brown, Campbell himself and Peter Mandelson had all come to the same conclusion over that weekend – that is, two weeks before Mandelson's 'delighted' letter to John Birt. Campbell reflected: 'It was sensible to keep the option open but it wasn't difficult to build the arguments against it ... We could see it would be good for TV, we were not convinced it would be good for politics. TB (Tony Blair) said you can imagine how ghastly the build-up would be', adding that Blair had remarked 'it is really all balls that it would improve democratic debate'.<sup>39</sup> Yet as late as 16 March, BBC executives had felt they were at 'the beginning of an intense, exhilarating ... two weeks of negotiation'.<sup>40</sup> Campbell's diary entry for precisely the same day reports that 'TB was now alarmed about the TV debate', with Campbell himself claiming – in typical fashion – that his own

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<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Jones, *Campaign 97* (Indigo, 1997).

<sup>37</sup> Tony Hall and Anne Sloman, 'The Television Debate that Never was', *Independent*, 2 July 1997.

<sup>38</sup> Butler and Kavanagh, *British General Election* (1997).

<sup>39</sup> Alastair Campbell, *Diaries*, i. *Prelude to Power* (Hutchinson, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Hall and Sloman, 'Television Debate'.

prediction was being borne out, as the saga became 'a gigantic media wank ... TB was intensely irritated by the whole thing.'<sup>41</sup>

What had become evident was that however intractable were the issues involved in attempting to set up debates, they became impossible once the cut and thrust of the election campaign itself had begun. Labour and Conservative spokesmen then accused each other of 'bad faith' in the negotiations and it was clear that more attention was being given to emerging from the debacle with political points scored (or at least, not lost) than actually seeking an agreement. It had appeared that progress was being made on both Ashdown's inclusion and the role of the audience. Then, however, Labour set a deadline of the Easter break at the end of March for an agreement; at the time, this was a surprise – in the light of Campbell's diary, now rather less so. On Good Friday, Conservative chairman, Brian Mawhinney told *Today* on Radio 4: 'BBC says it can happen, ITV says it can happen, I say it can happen. Blair is terrified, he's chicken.' (The poultry theme was destined for an extended run.) Labour's chief negotiator, Derry Irvine, responded in an *Independent* article on Easter Monday, insisting on studio audience involvement and that 'face to face' encounters should include Paddy Ashdown. Just as Harold Wilson had made the inclusion of Jo Grimond a condition in 1966, Labour sought to benefit from taking the higher ground of speaking up for the rights of the third party; in reality, on both occasions they knew well that an improved performance by the Liberals/Liberal Democrats would take more votes from the Tories than from Labour. Notwithstanding Blair's attitude, now revealed by Campbell, Lord Irvine placed the blame firmly on the Tories, claiming 'I negotiated in good faith having been told by Tony Blair that he very much wanted the debate to happen'.<sup>42</sup> By 2 April – exactly a month before polling day – Campbell was reporting with satisfaction that 'the debate idea was well and truly dead'.<sup>43</sup> Without the parties ever actually meeting round the same table, prospects for a 1997 TV election debate disappeared in mutual recriminations – sufficiently mutual for there not to be too much political cost on either side. John Major, though as expected defeated at the polls, was at least able to enjoy this pyrrhic victory: 'Tony Blair challenged me to a debate, to his dismay I accepted and to everyone's amusement he then chickened out.'<sup>44</sup> The consequent Tory stunt designed to embarrass Blair through the campaign was itself lifted from the US presidential debate circus: five years earlier, the Democrats too had dressed an actor as a chicken to pursue George Bush Senior when there was talk of him avoiding a debate with Bill Clinton.

Richard Tait, who led the ITV/ITN bid, described the failure as 'a missed opportunity of epic proportions'.<sup>45</sup> He cited four key reasons for the failure:

- the politicians left it too late;
- the three parties did not want the debates enough to make the minor concessions needed;
- Labour were already confident of winning and did not see the value of debates;
- the broadcasters failed to convince the parties of the public interest.

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<sup>41</sup> Campbell, *Diaries*, i.

<sup>42</sup> Derry Irvine, 'Blair Did Not "Chicken Out"', *Independent*, 31 Mar. 1997.

<sup>43</sup> Campbell, *Diaries*, i.

<sup>44</sup> Press conference, Conservative Central Office, 1 Apr. 1997 (with thanks to Michael Cockerell)

<sup>45</sup> Richard Tait, 'The Debate that Never Happened', in I. Crewe, B. Goschalk, and J. Bartle (eds), *Why Labour Won the 1997 General Election* (Cass, 1998).

The key BBC executives took a broadly similar view, saying that: ‘in this game, the politicians hold all the aces’. They too asked themselves afterwards if the politicians had really wanted a debate and if they had shared the broadcasters’ enthusiasm to make it the centrepiece of the election campaign. Their blunt conclusion – supported by the more recent perspectives – ‘there is little evidence that they did’.<sup>46</sup>

### 1.6. *‘Nothing in it for us’*

Two more debate-less elections followed – the familiar double-lock of an incumbent Prime Minister enjoying a comfortable opinion poll lead made these the least likely occasions for the duck to be broken. Ironically, in 2001, the distinctly unfavourable circumstances coincided with the most elaborate and detailed preparations for debates. A Hansard Society seminar at Nuffield College, Oxford, in March 2000, brought together representatives of the broadcasters and the big parties to think through the issues, resulting in a hope that there would at least be a common proposal from the BBC and ITV. The debates would be made available to others, though Sky would not be part of the joint approach – an exclusion which, some thought, had an influence on the tactics employed by BSkyB in 2009. By June, Richard Tait, in an internal document, was urging ITV and ITN to take ‘a strong public position’ that debates would be a ‘vital part of television’s coverage of the election and one which will make a real contribution to public interest in and understanding of the political process at a time when voter apathy, particularly among young people, is growing’. But, he went on, ‘we should be realistic about the prospects of success ... recent political history should not make anyone too optimistic’.<sup>47</sup> In November, there was a clear proposal on the table (though there was no one actually sitting round one): two debates with the same format, one by each broadcaster, a Dimbleby for each, audiences which could applaud but not ask questions, each debate covering three key subjects, selected by a panel of senior broadcasters. On the following evenings, there would be four-party debates in Scotland and Wales. Encouragement came the same month, when Alastair Campbell was thought to have hinted of a change of heart. Talking to journalists at Westminster, he said, ‘My hunch is that, as you go on, then TV debates at some stage will happen. And I think they are a perfectly good thing in principle.’<sup>48</sup> The hare now seemed to be running.

Three of the key components for success in debate negotiations appeared to be coming together: a signal from the three big parties; BBC and ITV/ITN working together; and things moving several months before anyone expected a campaign to begin. Campbell, however, apparently had regretted his words immediately. And although the Liberal Democrats had quickly agreed, the Conservatives – whilst not rejecting the plan – displayed significant doubts. Party chairman Michael Ancram was opposed to three-way debates, preferring a series of three two-way debates – one of them to be hosted by Sky. From a position 20 points behind in the polls, though, it was not too surprising when William Hague eventually tried to put Tony Blair on the spot by accepting at least the principle of debates. Labour’s formal and familiar response, on 17 January 2001, came from its Director of Communications, Lance Price, a former BBC political correspondent: ‘we are

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<sup>46</sup> Hall and Sloman, ‘Television Debate’.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Tait, ‘The Leaders Debates 2001/2’, internal ITV memo, 13 June 2000, BBC archive with permission of ITV/ITN and Richard Tait.

<sup>48</sup> Alastair Campbell, speech to House of Commons Press Gallery lunch, 16 Nov. 2000.

not in the US. The UK is not electing a President and our political and constitutional positions are entirely different.<sup>49</sup> But this element of the argument was more thoroughly set out by Price than perhaps it had been before:

*When a sitting President is being challenged, his opponent is not known until a few months before the election. When a president is retiring, neither candidate is known until that time. In the UK, we have an individual recognised in our constitution ... whose job is to lead the Opposition and so present himself as an alternative to the Prime Minister, a post financed from public funds and with guaranteed access to the media.*

He went on to cite the weekly parliamentary Prime Minister's Question Time, plus the annual debate on the Queen's Speech, as examples of how the British public had plenty of opportunities to judge the rivals – unlike the US. Furthermore, Price expressed concern that the debate would be open to legal challenge from smaller parties – an issue Alastair Campbell had insisted the media were not properly addressing in 1997, though why that was a problem for the political parties, rather than the broadcasters, was not immediately clear on either occasion. Price's conclusion also reflected the familiar complaint (of New Labour in general and Campbell in particular) against media coverage of politics – that, unlike real people, the media always tended to 'focus on process not policy' and that would mean debates not adding 'significantly ... to the public's interest in or understanding of the issues'. The tone of the constitutional and legal objections presented by Price was something of a contrast to the candid explanation he had set out in his diary entry for 15 January, two days earlier: 'There's really nothing in it for us at all. So we're just saying it's all very complicated and we don't want there to be a legal challenge from the Nationalists, etc, for not getting equal time. But we need to get ourselves off the hook once and for all.'<sup>50</sup>

In 2005, Michael Howard threw down the traditional opposition leader's challenge; Tony Blair delivered the equally traditional incumbent's rebuff. But he did agree to a new TV grilling which some of his senior strategists thought – before and afterwards – was an unnecessary risk and a mistake. In 2001, each leader had appeared – singly – on separate BBC *Question Time* programmes. In truth, the audience viewing figures were not high and their impact was modest. But at the last minute in 2005, the BBC secured agreement for the three UK party leaders to appear on the same *Question Time* programme with David Dimbleby – still on their own, one after the other for 30 minutes each, live and prime time.<sup>51</sup> The effect of having the same audience – with both its temperature and confidence rising – gave Tony Blair, the last of the three, one of his least comfortable half-hours in a Labour campaign which had been deliberately designed with a degree of masochism to face down New Labour critics. The programme certainly made more impact and drew nearly as large an audience as the three 2001 programmes combined: for some, at least, it was the TV highlight of the 2005 election. Some even saw it as a step towards Prime Ministerial debates. As a format, however, it was really the polar opposite of such a debate – each leader subjected alone to the combination of unpredictable public questioning and a

<sup>49</sup> Lance Price, letter to John Birt, 17 Jan. 2001, BBC Archive.

<sup>50</sup> Lance Price, *The Spin Doctor's Diary* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> The author is obliged to declare an interest as Executive Editor of the *Question Time* election programmes in both 2001 and 2005.

supremely briefed chairman – but free of the more familiar party-political combat. For a believer in ultimate scrutiny, the dream election campaign would include both formats: the freestyle *Question Time* cauldron and the structured purity of would-be Prime Ministers taking each other on in debate. Political masochism, however, only goes so far.

Debates did not happen before 2010 for a very clear reason. It was not, on the whole, because party leaders and their advisers were wedded to a particular British tradition which involved a principled objection to debates. Opposing Westminster political parties would not agree to TV election debates until they were sure there was something in it, electorally, for them. A well-established incumbent prime minister would not normally concede the equalising effects of a debate; a party firmly ahead in the polls and confident of victory would not jeopardise their grip. This is neither surprising, nor reprehensible. But the logical conclusion of 50 years without debates was that they would only actually happen if there were very special circumstances in which both the big parties reasonably envisaged political advantage – or when one of the parties made the sort of major miscalculation which, it is claimed, Richard Nixon committed in 1960. So what was it in the UK in 2010? Did one of the political parties make a strategic or tactical error in agreeing to debates? Were there unprecedented political conditions which meant that all the parties were justified in anticipating electoral benefit? How crucial was the role of the broadcasters? Why, after 50 years of resistance, did the UK finally succumb to Prime Ministerial debates in the 2010 campaign?

## 2. How Debates Happened in 2010

### 2.1. *Still Not America ...*

By 2005, there was almost a sense among the broadcasters of 'going through the motions'. Some felt the best opportunity for debates had been missed and there was a strong chance that they might never happen. If the *Leaders' Question Time* on BBC One did at least bring the three UK party leaders onto the same platform on the same programme with the same audience, it also highlighted the stark reality of how far away the broadcasters were from actually persuading them to appear together in genuine debate.

But it was another *Question Time* programme, in November 2005, which may have been the moment when the tide turned, though it was not obvious at the time. The two challengers for the Conservative leadership appeared together on the programme. Before answering the first question, David Cameron took the opportunity to make it clear that, if he won, he would expect to have the same sort of televised debate with the Prime Minister at the next election. Soon after Gordon Brown replaced Tony Blair, Cameron offered to 'pay for the taxi to take him to the studio ... In fact, I'll even drive the cab!'<sup>52</sup>

Subsequently, in the House of Commons, following the Obama–McCain debates in 2008, Cameron asked Brown if he agreed 'that the time had come for such election debates in Britain'.<sup>53</sup> Such forthright challenges, coming as they did publicly from Cameron himself (not just from a spokesman or in less high-profile settings), raised the stakes in a way that pinned the Conservative leader more definitively to debates in as yet unknown circumstances. Previous opposition leaders had been more inclined to hedge their commitments. Even Tony Blair's 'any time, any place' response to John Major in 1997 was through a spokesman's mouth and so carried less political and personal weight. This emphasis from Cameron would reduce the Conservatives' room for manoeuvre if – at any stage – they began to think that debates were, after all, no longer in their electoral interests. Although, as we have seen, challenges from opposition leaders to incumbents are par for the course, some Conservative strategists – as the party's opinion poll lead grew – did begin to feel that debates would indeed be an unnecessary risk. Against all this, however, there was a confident underlying belief that Gordon Brown, the new Labour leader, would be no match for Cameron as a TV performer.

Contrary to Conservative concerns at previous elections, little thought seems to have been given to the impact of the Liberal Democrats. Ted Heath had steadfastly refused to consider the inclusion of Jo Grimond. Mrs Thatcher's advisers had warned her – in 1979 – that debates involving the Liberal leader, David Steel, would harm the Tory vote more than Labour's. John Major would not have Paddy Ashdown included in 1997 and even in 2005, when there was little prospect of debates, the Conservative chairman, Michael Ancram, made it clear that three-way debates were a non-starter. With hindsight, some of the 2010 Conservative strategists now accept that the Lib Dem threat did not weigh heavily on their considerations – claiming their altruistic belief that they were 'doing the right thing' by agreeing to debates trumped any such concerns. For many of the party supporters who

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<sup>52</sup> George Pascoe-Watson, 'I'll Give EU Vote', *Sun*, 6 Sept. 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Hansard, 27 Feb. 2008. col. 1084.

subsequently contributed views to the ConservativeHome website, this was a significant tactical error (see Chapter 4).

With polling day probably a year away, the possibilities for election debates seemed to be following a familiar pattern, with the two opposition parties lined up in favour and the initiative lying with the incumbent. There were some similarities with the circumstances of 1992 – a relatively new Prime Minister with less charisma than the recently replaced predecessor, a recovering opposition paying more attention than before to how it was perceived by the electorate – and an outcome which was far from certain. At first, the signs were not positive. Replying to David Cameron’s challenge in the Commons after the US Presidential debates, Gordon Brown relied on the established formula: ‘In America they do not have Question Time every week where we can examine what the different policies of the different parties are.’<sup>54</sup> Sixteen years earlier, John Major, responding to a similar question, replied: ‘we hold televised debates in the House twice a week’.<sup>55</sup> Stephen Coleman describes such responses as ‘glib’, pointing out that the ‘disparity of constitutional positions during PMQs, with the Leader of the Opposition (and others) only allowed to question, and the Prime Minister expected to give executive-briefed answers rather than raise questions with his opponents, does not amount to what can usefully be regarded as debate’.<sup>56</sup> So there was little initial optimism that Prime Minister Brown – who, according to Peter Mandelson, acknowledged himself ‘he wasn’t a politician for the television age’<sup>57</sup> – would feel comfortable departing from the traditional reluctance of incumbents. Still, what you don’t ask for, you don’t get – so the broadcasters, separately, began to think about which motions they would go through this time.

## 2.2. *Empty Chairs, Changing Games*

During 2009, the balance of arguments subtly started to shift. Conservative standing in the opinion polls – averaging a lead of more than 15% for most of the year – began to look unassailable. The electoral atmosphere seemed to have more echoes of 1997 than 1992, of an era ending and expectations of a change of government for the first time in more than a decade (though Labour’s poll lead before its 1997 victory was generally above 20%). Like James Callaghan in 1979 and John Major in 1997, Gordon Brown needed a ‘game-changer’. And there was another argument which was beginning to carry increasing sway – money. The Conservatives had tried to maximise their chances of finding a game-changer in 1997 by calling a long – a very long – six-week election campaign. That was not an option open to Labour in 2010, when it could scarcely even afford a short one. The idea of concentrating direct communication with the voters at large through a series of debates – paid for by the broadcasters – rather than spending millions on nation-wide billboards, stadium-size rallies and event-hopping helicopters, began to appeal strongly to cash-strapped strategists.

The first public inkling that Labour might be beginning to consider taking part in debates came, ironically, from Peter Mandelson who had been firmly against them in 1997. In July 2009 he told Anne McElvoy of the *Evening Standard* that he ‘didn’t think Gordon would have a problem with debates’

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Hansard, 18 Feb. 1992, col. 173.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen Coleman, ‘Televised Leaders’ Debates: An Evaluation and a Proposal’, Hansard Society, Mar. 1997.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Mandelson, *The Third Man: Life at the Heart of New Labour* (Harper Press, 2010).

and that they were a 'good idea'.<sup>58</sup> The notion, as Mandelson put it, that voters would 'realise that Gordon is the man with the substance' compared to the other leaders, was taking shape. Labour was still having its own internal debate about the wisdom of going for debates, with Ed Balls arguing that they would give the 'telegenic and personable' Cameron the 'sheen of equality' with the Prime Minister.<sup>59</sup> Mandelson acknowledged afterwards that Brown, like Blair before him, 'had done everything he could to avoid [debates] ... it was Gordon who believed he had the most to lose. I was not so sure about this.'<sup>60</sup> But Labour insiders insist that, by the end of July, the decision had already been taken to go for debates. It is claimed they deliberately then kept opponents – and broadcasters – guessing while a 'war-book' was prepared. This was a strategy for the negotiations, a plan for the 'red lines' of what would and wouldn't be acceptable.

By now, however, the tactics were subtly different. This was no longer a last throw of the dice to try to win the election – a poll in the week when Mandelson dropped his hint had suggested Labour was now 18 points behind. Quietly, party strategists already seem to have recognised that this was not so much game-changer as game up. So the motivation now was more defensive – a spoiling operation to prevent the Tories winning an overall majority. That, at least, is the perspective offered by key Labour insiders after the election in claiming that the debates 'war-book' went exactly to plan. The debates – so the argument goes – would disrupt the campaign momentum which otherwise may have moved inevitability towards a Cameron majority premiership. It is an interpretation which is shared by many Conservatives, including the former deputy chairman, Lord Ashcroft (see Chapter 4).

During the summer it was far from clear to the broadcasters, though, that debates were really yet on the agenda. The BBC and ITV in particular were mindful – from looking back at past failures – of the first two important lessons of debate negotiation: first, that even if all the political parties seem to be in favour of debates in principle, there is still a minefield to cross before there can be an actual agreement on the detail; second, to have any chance at all of picking a way through that minefield, the main broadcasters must work together and present a united front.

In the autumn of 2007, while Gordon Brown had agonised over whether to call an early election, a joint approach was hurriedly agreed – on that occasion, of course, coming to nothing. But the initiative was now revived, with executives from the BBC, ITV and Sky agreeing to get together in early September. Two days before the meeting, however, Sky launched a unilateral campaign calling for election debates, declaring that they would hold them whether all the leaders turned up or not – and that they would make them available to the other broadcasters. It was typically audacious and guaranteed to irritate the BBC and ITV, who cancelled the meeting with Sky and quickly put forward their own joint initiative. The spectre of 1997's failures was looming even before anyone had reached the starting line. For the BBC and ITV there was a fine line between, on the one hand, fulfilling their public service obligations to engage audiences in the election and, on the other hand, embarking on a public campaign to cajole the politicians into taking part (in reality, by threatening to 'empty-chair' one of them – the Prime Minister). They did not see it as their job to lecture the politicians on

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<sup>58</sup> Anne McElvoy, 'Gordon Brown "Ready for Live TV Debate with Cameron"', *London Evening Standard*, 29 July 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Anne McElvoy, 'The Box that Changed Britain', *Sunday Times*, 13 June 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Mandelson, *The Third Man*.

democracy. Yet in hindsight, the spat was probably helpful. It raised the profile of debates by focusing some media attention on whether or not they should finally happen and this time it took place against the background of the scandals over MPs' expenses. All the political establishment was now under pressure to account for itself to the public, to be more open and willing to engage with those who pay-rolled politics. The political cost of not having debates suddenly seemed to be rising, even if it was uncertain at that stage who might be landed with the blame.

### 2.3. *Keeping it Simple*

The broadcasters made their peace by the end of September 2009 and set about forging a joint approach. Six executives<sup>61</sup> – two from each of the big broadcasting organisations – came together and, with a keen eye on the historical pitfalls, began a process which would take five months of remorseless planning, negotiation and caffeine. Aware of the myriad sub-complexities which could derail progress before it had begun, the first priority was to establish the simple basic principles and format through which the broadcasters could present a united front and hope the parties would accept, rather than unpick.

The most obvious of these – which, for Conservative sceptics, was to prove the most controversial – was that the three largest UK parties should be treated equally. Even in 1997, legal opinion had been that the then Liberal Democrat leader, Paddy Ashdown, would have to be included, one of the complications fatal to the prospect of debates taking place. Two elections later, the Liberal Democrats had three times as many MPs and even if – as critics maintained – it was fanciful to suggest that Nick Clegg was a genuine candidate for the premiership, nevertheless, his party was streets ahead of all the 'other' parties in terms of UK-wide electoral standing and, crucially, was putting up candidates throughout England, Scotland and Wales – enough at least to demonstrate an aspiration for Downing Street. Intriguingly, Peter Mandelson says that when he had preliminary meetings about the debates with David Cameron's communications director, Andy Coulson, they 'had agreed ... to exclude the Lib Dems'.<sup>62</sup> But when the formula of equal treatment was put forward by the broadcasters from the off as a given, what had been the 'key issue' in 1997 – how to treat the Lib Dems – was removed at a stroke without any negotiation. It was a vital step and one which some in Conservative ranks regarded as a strategic error, a verdict they returned to in the wake of 'Cleggmania' and the election result. They had the sympathy of Alastair Campbell, who said he 'was amazed that the Lib Dems were given equal billing. When we were negotiating ... in 1997, even Paddy Ashdown did not believe he should be treated in the same way as TB and John Major. Why? Because he knew he had no chance of being Prime Minister.'<sup>63</sup> Observant readers will have noticed that there were no debates in 1997.

The 'other' parties, however, immediately smelt a ruse – from the BBC at least – in the branding of the debates as 'Prime Ministerial', rather than as 'Leaders' – a device, as they saw it, to exclude them from the platform. This

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Jermy from ITV and Jonathan Munro from ITN; Chris Birkett and Jonathan Levy from Sky; Sue English and Ric Bailey from the BBC.

<sup>62</sup> Mandelson, *The Third Man*.

<sup>63</sup> Alastair Campbell, "I Agree with David" Clegg has Disqualified himself from a Place in TV Debates Next Time', Alastair's Blog, 25 Mar. 2011: [www.alastaircampbell.org/blog/2011/03/25/i-agree-with-david-clegg-has-disqualified-himself-from-a-place-in-tv-debates-next-time](http://www.alastaircampbell.org/blog/2011/03/25/i-agree-with-david-clegg-has-disqualified-himself-from-a-place-in-tv-debates-next-time).

was an important principle to the Corporation – that for a Westminster election, the participants should be the leaders of the biggest parties in the House of Commons. (The programme title ‘Prime Ministerial’ was retained for the BBC debate: with each broadcaster seeking to bring a more distinctive identity to their otherwise similar programmes, ITV understandably branded theirs ‘The First Election Debate’, Sky stuck simply to ‘The Leaders’ Debate’.) In particular, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru could claim that in Scotland and Wales respectively, they too were ‘major’ parties (indeed they were both in government) and that voters there had a right to hear from the four big parties, not just three of them. And the UK Independence Party could claim not only that it too was standing sufficient candidates to aspire to government (albeit from a base of no elected MPs) but also that it had wiped the floor with everyone but the Conservatives in the most recent UK-wide election (for the European Parliament a few months earlier).

The complications of how to deal with the other parties had been one of the reasons cited by Labour’s Lance Price in 2001 when rejecting debates. So the 2009 negotiators were anxious to fence off such difficulties from the start, not least because it would be inappropriate to allow the larger parties to lay down conditions about the treatment of the rest. It was also an issue that each of the broadcasters had to deal with separately: Sky News broadcasts a single programme stream to the whole UK; BBC One transmits separately to England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland; ITV also broadcasts by nation and region – but is owned and run separately in different parts of the UK; ITV and Sky are regulated by Ofcom on impartiality, the BBC is not. The negotiating team made it clear, therefore, that each broadcaster would have to work out its own way of ‘ensuring due impartiality across the UK’ (shorthand for sorting out the problem of the ‘others’) without complicating the joint approach for UK-wide debates. In the event, the broadcasters each offered separate debates between the four big parties respectively in Scotland and Wales (and, for BBC and ITV, in Northern Ireland), taking steps to ensure that audiences in those nations were being given an appropriate opportunity to hear about the different political issues at stake there during a Westminster election, compared to England. The BBC – which being publicly funded is always likely to be the most vulnerable to legal challenge – also constructed an elaborate mechanism to ensure that all the parties with some level of UK support – UKIP, the Greens and the BNP, as well as the nationalists – were given reasonable opportunities around the debates to have their voices heard across BBC TV and radio channels.

The broadcasters also set out a number of other principles aimed both at establishing their own editorial independence in the negotiating process and pre-empting some of the traditional sticking points. There would be three live debates – one each for the three big broadcasters (a brief dalliance with Channels 4 and Five came to nothing, not least because that would threaten the numerical neatness); they would run in peak time for around 90 minutes each; there would be a live audience (with no assumptions about its role); the format would be the same for each; questions would be submitted by the public and selected by each broadcaster using an editorial panel of its own journalists. The three watchwords for the broadcasters – to misquote another Prime Minister – were ‘simplification, simplification, simplification’.

Making the distinction between what the broadcasters would do jointly and what they had to do individually was also an important factor in overcoming what could have become a disagreement with the two largest

parties and what could yet re-emerge as a future issue: the establishment of an 'independent' body to oversee election debates. There were suggestions from both Labour and the Conservatives that they favoured the appointment of a neutral group or chair, separate from both politicians and broadcasters, to oversee the negotiations. Again, the American influence was to the fore, where the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) has sponsored debates since 1988, a role taken previously by the League of Women Voters. In the US, this structure emanated from a specific legal restriction on the way broadcasters covered presidential elections as a way of distancing them from the organisation of the debates. At Westminster, there was something of a misconception about what the CPD is. Labour came to an early debate meeting armed with a copy of the Bush–Kerry agreement from 2004 intending it as a blueprint for the sort of process they expected in the UK. This did not go down well with the broadcasters. For a start, attempting to reach an agreement on who such an independent paragon might be would add a whole extra cycle of negotiation and complication as well as a brand-new resort for a reluctant party. More importantly, the BBC, ITV and Sky regarded the British broadcasting climate as very different from that of the US. Trusted guarantors of impartiality and independence was how the broadcasters saw themselves – for which each had responsibility not only to its audience, but also to respective regulators. They were adamant that responsibility could not be 'delegated' to some sort of quango-esque Commission. Indeed, there was some suggestion that there might be a role for the Electoral Commission itself – a notion it wisely ran a mile from. If the debates were going to happen at all, the broadcasters felt they must be in the driving seat and not, as their colleagues are in the United States, dependent on whatever arrangement is brokered by the Commission between the two big parties: 'The campaigns hammer out an agreement that suits their own purposes, which then gets presented to the sponsoring institution as a done deal.'<sup>64</sup> One US lobbyist goes further, claiming that, far from being independent, the CPD is controlled by Republican and Democrat insiders and that the 'function of the CPD, as an arms-length organ of the parties, amounts to a shocking institutional rigging of the electoral process that degrades our democracy'.<sup>65</sup> James Karayan, a producer on the 1976 US debates spelt out the danger: 'If the candidates' representatives do the planning, it won't be with the goal of informing the electorate uppermost in their minds. Their main concern is – has to be – to ensure that their respective candidates get the maximum exposure and the minimum risk.'<sup>66</sup> It is also a system which struggles to cope with a third candidate.

Just how alien the American model is to Britain's newer tradition of broadcasting independence is illustrated by the way in which journalists were selected to sit on the panels questioning the presidential candidates: only those approved by both sides passed the test – hardly a recipe for encouraging tough scrutiny. The resolution of UK broadcasters not to go down such a route sidelined the idea, at least for the discussion which began in 2009.

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<sup>64</sup> Schroeder, *Presidential Debates*.

<sup>65</sup> George Farah, *No Debate: How the Republican and Democratic Parties Secretly Control the Presidential Debates* (Seven Stories Press, 2004).

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Schroeder, *Presidential Debates*, 28.

## 2.4. Round a Table at Last

So when the 13 negotiators (two from each broadcaster, two from each party – except the Liberal Democrats, who decided they needed three) finally met in early December at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in Portland Place, London, they had already taken the process of setting up debates further than any of their predecessors – who had never even succeeded in bringing everyone round the same table. By then, there had already been direct meetings between Peter Mandelson and Andy Coulson, at which the two big parties had agreed to the basic format put forward by the broadcasters. Just before Christmas, the BBC, ITV and Sky were able to announce that the parties had accepted their proposals in principle. Putting this into the public domain was a key moment, because from then on, the expectation was that the debates would happen. The negotiators knew, however, they were barely past the starting point and that there were, as yet, many detailed wrangles to overcome. But what had become clear was that everyone involved was genuinely committed to making the debates happen: ‘the willingness to compromise that [ITN’s] Richard Tait had felt was absent in 1997 was demonstrated by all parties’ according to one of his successors.<sup>67</sup> Of all the many hurdles which had stood in the way for 50 years, the simplest and the most important was the attitude of the two largest parties: for the first time, both were serious about wanting debates – and at the same time.

The negotiators though, conscious of the history, could take nothing for granted. For two months, with the election looming closer, they worked their way through the minutiae, any detail of which could still have tripped up the process. But one indication of the seriousness was the lack of leaks. An unusual level of trust had developed which meant that, even when speculative and potentially damaging stories appeared in the newspapers, they were not allowed to plunge the negotiations into the normal party-political skirmishes. Alan Schroeder described the negotiations for US Presidential debates as a ‘blood sport’.<sup>68</sup> In the UK, after the megaphoned exchanges of 1997, the contrast in 2009–10 could not have been greater. The ability to keep discussions confidential was a critical factor in making progress; the temptation for each of the political parties – and each of the broadcasters, come to that – to ‘spin’ their own perspectives in attempting to gain tactical advantage was resisted. All sides have spoken of the good-humoured and positive atmosphere in which the negotiations were conducted, with ‘the sort of bonding that attaches to small groups locked away from the rest of the world’.<sup>69</sup> ITV’s Michael Jerney recalled how one tense moment was relieved by Coulson jokingly insisting that the candidates must all enter the arena accompanied by the Rocky theme tune ‘Eye of the Tiger’.<sup>70</sup> Given the normal state of disagreement which exists between political parties themselves and the healthy level of fractiousness often characterising the relationship between broadcasters and all political parties, this bonhomie was no mean achievement. Nor was it insignificant in successfully bringing TV debates to the 2010 election. Building the sense of trust in seeking a common aim is a critical factor – certainly without it there would always have been the potential for discussions to break down in

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<sup>67</sup> Michael Jerney, lecture at Cardiff University, 25 Oct. 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Schroeder, *Presidential Debates*, 29.

<sup>69</sup> Ric Bailey, ‘What Took So Long?’, in D. Wring, R. Mortimore, and S. Atkinson (eds), *Political Communication in Britain: The Leader Debates, the Campaign and the Media in the 2010 General Election* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>70</sup> Jerney, lecture, 2010.

acrimony and a political imperative to lay blame on opponents as happened in 1997. This face-to-face progress had the effect of steadily neutralising the traditional ways in which debate discussions had faltered: there would now be a variety of witnesses who would know exactly what had gone wrong. It would make it far more difficult to convince the public and media outside that, if the talks failed, the explanation was high principle rather than low self-interest.

One intriguing element was the way the contours of discussion developed in terms of the alliances and differences between the various negotiators. It would be an exaggeration to portray the key arguments as having all the broadcasters in one camp and the political parties united in the other. Nevertheless, the underlying nuances of approach did tend to draw the dividing lines in that way. An unspoken suspicion of the parties was that the broadcasters would always tend towards the 'game-show' outcome; correspondingly, the broadcasters sensed they were having to nudge the parties away from too much safety and consequent dullness. Both characterisations are too crude, but they meant that the party-political representatives often found themselves on the same side of the pivot of much of the negotiations. That was an unusual scenario for Westminster politics, soon to be played out more spectacularly after polling day as they sought common ground on a rather larger scale.

The negotiating method has been described elsewhere, but in the context of possible future debates, it is worth exploring briefly here. The broadcasters having established the broad framework through setting out, then agreeing, their joint proposition of principles, the negotiations themselves were largely a matter of filling in the detail. Although this involved many difficult and previously insurmountable problems, very few could be seen as matters of fundamental principle and, therefore, none was quite large enough individually to justify walking away from the negotiations. If allowed to accumulate, however, or if one party felt it was being disadvantaged by too many of them, they certainly still had the potential to wreck the process.

The layout at RIBA and then later, more famously, at the headquarters of the Mothers' Union in Westminster, was tailor-made for patient negotiation. Around the central plenary area each party had its own smaller 'break-out' room to allow time and space for separate discussion or private consultation with key figures elsewhere (with the broadcasters remaining together in the central room). In fact, the smaller rooms were seldom used and, in general, it was clear that all those present had the authority or mandate to make decisions. This was another important ingredient – that what was agreed in the negotiations should not be subsequently repudiated by others outside the room. Differences were explored only to the point where they could not be resolved and were then put to one side (that is, they remained short of the point where they became a disagreement). Effort was concentrated on extending the areas which could be agreed. After each meeting, there would be a new draft – 15 in all – as gradually the contentious issues were whittled down. The role and make-up of the studio audience took up much discussion, as did the structure of the debate – opening and closing statements, rebuttals, free debate periods; timings, themes, the role of the moderator. This is the process by which the negotiations arrived at their '76

rules’<sup>71</sup> – actually, there were about a dozen proscriptions: most of the clauses were simply descriptive of what would happen and how the debates would pan out. They were there for the avoidance of misunderstanding, rather than to straitjacket and, despite the dire predictions of suffocation, were largely acknowledged as effective.

Only once throughout the negotiations – right at the end – did the broadcasters fear that a disagreement could yet scupper the whole enterprise. It came over the seemingly innocuous issue of which theme should be in which debate, but it threatened an impasse which marks a warning for future negotiators of the importance of nailing down every last detail. For once, the Labour negotiators were caught out when they missed the significance of a draw between the broadcasters to decide which of them would stage the three agreed themes – domestic affairs, foreign affairs, and the economy. It meant the economy would come last, just a week before polling day. Too late it was realised that Gordon Brown was adamant the economy should be at the beginning, setting the tone for the campaign. The two-week stand-off came as the election announcement could have been imminent – a time when, as 1997 demonstrated, resolving differences is hardest. What is more, the nerves of the other parties and the broadcasters were tightening: none of them knew – as Labour did – when exactly the election was to be called, a critical advantage for the party in government. Almost everything else was sorted. Perhaps, in the end, that was the key. By separating out all the hurdles and diminishing them, by continuing to talk about other non-contentious issues to keep open lines of communication and, crucially, by retaining confidence that all sides were committed to a successful outcome, when a significant problem did arise, it could not be used as an excuse by anyone to pull the plug. Labour eventually blinked and, with a few already made concessions as cover, accepted the agreed formula: ‘We wanted to have the economy debate first’, Peter Mandelson recalled, ‘but lost out on this – not that it ultimately made any difference.’<sup>72</sup>

### *2.5. What Made 2010 Different*

When the 13 negotiators shook hands and realised agreement had been reached on 1 March, there was a genuine sense that history had been made. Six months earlier, the broadcasters had had no real way of knowing how far the two key parties were committed to debates: whether the negotiations would be used simply to create the best possible environment for themselves in debates to which they were already committed; or – as history indicated – whether the many obstacles would be used as safety mechanisms so that still lukewarm participants could withdraw at some stage. In analysing the reasons for failure in 1997, Richard Tait pointed to four factors, each of which was addressed in 2010. First, ‘the politicians left it too late’ in 1997:<sup>73</sup> Labour’s decision to go for debates in July 2009 and the broadcasters’ chivvying of the parties in the early autumn meant that the groundwork was laid before the political temperature was too high; even so, starting barely six months before the campaign only just left enough time for 2010. Second, in 1997, ‘the three parties did not want the debates enough to make the minor concessions

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<sup>71</sup> Ric Bailey, Prime Ministerial Debates blog: programme format published as PDF, BBC Online, 2 Mar. 2010: [www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/pm\\_debates\\_programme\\_format.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/pm_debates_programme_format.pdf).

<sup>72</sup> Mandelson, *The Third Man*.

<sup>73</sup> Tait, ‘The Debate that Never Happened’.

needed':<sup>74</sup> this was the crucial difference in 2009–10 – the three big parties clearly *did* want the debates enough for progress to be made. David Cameron had repeatedly made clear and public commitments from which he showed no signs of wanting to retreat; for Gordon Brown, bringing Peter Mandelson back to the centre of Labour's strategic thinking was the catalyst for making a pragmatic assessment of the party's best hopes in the circumstances – concluding it needed a money-saving game-changer which might at least head off a Cameron majority; the Liberal Democrats needed no convincing. Third, in 1997, 'Labour were already confident of winning and did not see the value of debates':<sup>75</sup> in 2009, David Cameron was less confident of victory and did see more value in debates, partly because of his own experience beating David Davis for the leadership, as well as believing his own TV skills were superior to Gordon Brown's. More broadly, though, the Tories' opinion poll lead was never large enough to assure them of victory in a way that would have unambiguously exposed debates as a reckless risk. And crucially from the Tory perspective in 2010, unlike in 1997 – and most other elections since the 1970s – they did not spend time worrying about the impact of the third party (see Chapter 4), meaning that the broadcasters' categorical insistence on equality succeeded in bypassing one of the most difficult debate issues. From Labour's perspective, Gordon Brown's incumbency carried so little advantage in 2010 that he had little to lose in debates – Blair, by contrast, in 1997, was at the height of his reputation, with everything to lose in an untried environment – 'political common sense', according to Mandelson.<sup>76</sup> The fourth factor highlighted by Tait as causing the 1997 failure was that 'the broadcasters failed to convince the parties of the public interest';<sup>77</sup> this was, perhaps, a euphemism for the inability of ITV and the BBC to work together – that they didn't regard the debates as important enough to put aside their own differences. The way that changed in 2009 was certainly an important factor, but as a reason for debates happening or not, it is actually secondary, in the sense that such disagreement can provide one of a number of convenient excuses for any political party which does not really want debates – and it is that which is the primary factor.

So the broadcasters' tactics in this environment were to establish clear over-reaching principles from the beginning – stake out their editorial independence on those issues where they would not concede – but then to adopt various ways of reassuring each party that their differing fears about the debates would be taken into account. The parties seemed willing, but they needed to be coaxed across the finishing line, skirting the obstacles that had tripped up all previous attempts. In hindsight, it is evident that the parties were probably more committed throughout than the broadcasters dared to hope for – but they had all been peering out from the shadow of 50 years of failure.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Mandelson, *The Third Man*.

<sup>77</sup> Tait, 'The Debate that Never Happened'.

### 3. Are TV Election Debates Right for the UK?

#### 3.1. *Squeezing the Campaign Air*

Even as Labour was taking the decision to agree to debates, Steve Richards of the *Independent* was sounding a clear warning: 'Do not believe for one moment that the televised debates would do anything to enhance Britain's fragile democracy.'<sup>78</sup> The election campaign, argued Richards, should be about debating which party has the best solutions for Britain's economic recovery, better public services, and the most constructive foreign policy. Televised leader debates would mean none of these issues would 'get a look in ... The event, or events, will become the only talking point.' It is difficult to argue that Richards was not spot on about the latter – the phrase which did gain currency was that the debates had 'squeezed the air' from the rest of the campaign. But the extent to which serious issues did indeed 'get a look in' would seem to be less clear cut. Somewhat divergent verdicts were both reflected at the same post-election gathering of academics at Essex University:

*there was some expectation that the four and a half hours of debate ... might lead to the parties' policies taking centre stage, but that was not to be. The debates represented a classic case of presentation trumping substance.*<sup>79</sup>

*The pre-debate fears that the debates would focus on personality and style rather than policy and substance appear to have had little foundation in fact.*<sup>80</sup>

Richards himself admits, refreshingly, to a double U-turn, acknowledging that policy did get a look in, but still, in the end, regarding the debates as a 'damaging distortion ... in spite of the admirable focus on policy in the debates, form and performance were what mattered'.<sup>81</sup>

It may seem odd now, with hindsight, to start raising questions about the future of debates, especially when the author spent many hours shut away with fellow negotiators helping to make them happen in 2010 and there appears to be such a consensus, including among critics, that they are here to stay. Certainly on the broadcasting side, however, there is no assumption that debates will automatically happen again at the next election, in 2015 or sooner – indeed, Sky's Head of News, John Ryley, declares himself 'pessimistic'.<sup>82</sup> But if debates are to become an electoral fixture in the UK, it is clearly necessary to know whether or not they are 'a good thing' and important to consider if the fears of the sceptics were borne out. The final chapter will look at the prospects for next time – considerations which dwell on the same sort of political calculations which kept debates off the air for so long. First, though, let us take at face value the less self-interested objections to the UK having debates and re-examine whether they *should* happen again. After all, for 50 years, these arguments have taken place on a hypothetical level, trying to graft across experiences from elsewhere – notably and often misleadingly the United States – and applying them to the UK political scene. Now at last we

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<sup>78</sup> Steve Richards, 'The Last Thing we Need is a Televised Election Debate', *Independent*, 31 July 2009: [www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/steve-richards/steve-richards-the-last-thing-we-need-is-a-televised-election-debate-1765228.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/steve-richards/steve-richards-the-last-thing-we-need-is-a-televised-election-debate-1765228.html).

<sup>79</sup> Ivor Gaber, 'The "Hollowed Out Election" or "Where Did All the Policy Go?"', paper at the Political Studies Association's 'Elections, Parties and Public Opinion Conference', 10–12 Sept. 2010.

<sup>80</sup> Nicholas Allen, Judith Bara, and John Bartle, 'The Content of the Leadership Debates', paper at the Political Studies Association's 'Elections, Parties and Public Opinion Conference', 10–12 Sept. 2010.

<sup>81</sup> Steve Richards, 'Were we Duped by Those TV Debates?', *Independent*, 14 Apr. 2011.

<sup>82</sup> John Ryley, lecture to Oxford Media Society, 2 Oct. 2010.

have the real experience of our own debates. So this chapter will look at whether the debates made an impact in a beneficial way, with a proper political engagement of some kind, or whether they operated simply at the level of reality TV, the 'X-factor' trivialisation of the election. It will discuss whether vital elements of previous campaigns have been lost or obscured by the dominance of the debates; and it will assess claims that they are damaging to our politics, especially in the context of the so-called 'presidentialisation' of our political system.

### 3.2. Voters' Verdict

This is not a study which is intended in itself to offer detailed content analysis of the debates, or a thorough investigation of their impact either during the 2010 election campaign or on the result, research which has been carried out in considerable depth elsewhere. But it is an attempt to use elements of that work to help answer some basic questions, paying attention to the 'democratic value' of the debates. Aside from the separate interests of the political parties and their supporters and of the broadcasters and their audiences, were the Prime Ministerial debates of benefit to citizens in their most central task in a democracy and did they have an impact – for better or worse – on our political ecology? There is a necessary distinction here between the debates themselves and the way they were covered elsewhere in the media. Certainly, on their debut, the novelty contributed to the large amount of coverage of them, with extensive previews, analysis and post-mortems leaving little room or energy for much else. It can be argued that such a phenomenon is likely to diminish with familiarity: Australian and Canadian experience would suggest that, once debates become routine, the electorate – if not all the media – are less inclined to gorge.

An increased turn-out in the election, of course, is no proof of the democratic value of the debates – indeed, the 4% overall rise in 2010 was, if anything, disappointing to many who expected the level of interest in the campaign – apparently turbo-charged by the debates – as well as the likely closeness of the result, to produce a more spectacular increase. Voter numbers remained well down on both general elections held in the 1990s. What was perhaps more significant, however, was the proportionately greater increase – 7% – among the youngest voters, when considered alongside research carried out by Stephen Coleman and others in their assessment of the debates, *Leaders in the Living Room*.<sup>83</sup> They used a series of YouGov surveys before, during, and after the campaign, as well as a content analysis of selected parts of the media coverage. Coleman, a long-time proponent of debates, is highly positive about their impact in 2010, claiming in his summary:

- they were appreciated by the British public;
- around two-thirds of respondents said they had learnt something new from them – up to 70% felt they knew more about the policies of each party;
- nearly 90% of respondents said they had talked about the debates with others;
- watching the debates seemed to have energised first-time voters in particular.

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<sup>83</sup> Coleman, *Leaders in the Living Room*.

The last point is perhaps the most striking element of the surveys, leading Jay G. Blumler, in the same publication, to claim that ‘by and large the youngest voters, those aged 18 to 24 years old, seemed almost to have formed a special relationship with the Prime Ministerial debates’.<sup>84</sup> There was a hint of this in the viewing figures: although the first debate, from ITV, recorded a higher overall audience figure (9.4 million) than the third, from the BBC (8.4 million), the latter attracted more 18–24 year olds (1.9 million) than the former (1.7 million), suggesting an increasing attraction from this group as the campaign went on.<sup>85</sup> And the responses from the youngest voters to the debates varied significantly from the rest. For example, after the first debate, more than half 18–24-year-old respondents said they had become ‘more interested’ in the campaign, compared to fewer than a quarter of the over-55s; after polling, nearly three-quarters of the young age group (among those who had seen at least one programme) said they had learnt something about parties’ policies from the debates – the figure for the oldest group was a still impressive, but lower, 63%. A later, separate YouGov survey, carried out for Deloitte two months on, suggested a similar age disparity – more than half of those who said they had watched the debates claimed they had an impact on how they voted, the figure for 18 to 24 year olds was more than two-thirds.<sup>86</sup>

In two other areas, the YouGov surveys for *Leaders in the Living Room* provide intriguing insights into the impact of the debates: first, that despite the (arguably) policy-heavy nature of the discussions, viewers stuck with them. The audience figures had indicated that more than 22 million people saw some of at least one of the debates and that around 3 million watched some of all three.<sup>87</sup> That measures only those viewing at least three minutes’ worth, but the YouGov surveys for *Leaders in the Living Room* suggest considerable resilience: half the audience of each debate stayed with it to the end and many of the rest reported that they had seen at least an hour of the 90-minute programmes.

Second, the same YouGov surveys indicate some differential responses to the debates according to varying levels of interest in politics. When those who claimed they would ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ watch the debates were asked why, 60% of those who considered themselves ‘not at all’ interested in politics and around 50% of those with limited interest said it was because they wanted ‘help in making up my mind how to vote’. This compares to only 28% of those who were ‘very interested’ in politics giving that reason. Blumler, using Pfau’s established definition of a ‘marginally attentive’ citizen, reports that ‘if a less politically interested elector intended to watch a debate, then his or her motivation to do so might often have stemmed from the chance it would afford to weigh up the available voting options’.<sup>88</sup> After the debates, however, while those ‘not interested’ were less likely to have learnt something from them, those with a ‘limited interest’ were as likely to have learnt from the debates as those who were ‘very interested’ in politics. If (as viewing figures would suggest) debates might be the only televised political event reaching these ‘marginally attentive’ citizens, then – according to Blumler – they may be ‘not only occasionally reached by, but able to

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<sup>84</sup> Blumler, ‘Voters’ Responses’, *ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Source: BARB.

<sup>86</sup> ConservativeHome Election Review, YouGov survey for Deloitte LLP: 2,100 online panel interviews conducted 9–12 July 2010.

<sup>87</sup> Source: BARB.

<sup>88</sup> Blumler, ‘Voters’ Responses’. Definition in M. Pfau, ‘The Changing Nature of Presidential Debate Influence in the New Age of Mass Media Communication’, 9th Annual Conference on Presidential Rhetoric, Texas A&M University, 2003.

appreciate, a relatively more attractive specimen of political communication when it comes his or her way and perhaps even to make her or his way to the polling booth as a result'. The suggestion is that the debates 'may have a potential to increase turn-out amongst a number of voters who would normally have been little exposed to other, everyday sources of political communication'. Different YouGov surveys commissioned by the three broadcasters themselves indicated that half those who viewed the debates said they had improved their understanding of key issues, with an average of 43% claiming to have 'learnt a lot'.<sup>89</sup>

The other element which suggests that debates were not simply regarded as a spectacle for passive viewers, but helped to encourage active political engagement, was the level of discussion respondents report they provoked. In the Reuters YouGov post-election survey, 87% of respondents said they had talked about the debates with others (92% among younger voters). In terms of television programmes, as much as in political interest, this is no ordinary level of engagement.<sup>90</sup>

Some of the activity around the debates was of a new sort. In his analysis, Nic Newman says that it was 'quickly evident that social media had become a powerful and engaging back-channel to the debates, amplifying and extending their impact'.<sup>91</sup> For the young in particular, two-screen participation – TV plus mobile or laptop using Twitter or Facebook – became commonplace: 'You want to watch the debate on TV, because that is the right medium', according to Facebook's Richard Allen,<sup>92</sup> 'but you also want to chatter about it with your friends on social media.' Although, as Newman reports, the 29 tweets a second during the debates constituted a fraction of the total TV audience, the networking effect of social media points to a more concerted form of engagement than traditional sofa-slumped TV-watching – again, with a considerable slew towards the young voter.

So for many viewers, Blumler reports, the surveys suggest their 'exposure to the debates was something of a learning experience ... What [the debates] may have bolstered is the confidence of viewers in their grasp of what broadly the competing parties stood for and of what their leaders were like.'<sup>93</sup> The researchers are not suspicious of this distinctly positive response – 'when voters feel they know too little or are confused about an issue ... they do not hesitate to say so ... The debates didn't hit our sample members in that way at all.'

In conclusion, Blumler says: 'From the standpoint of the British public, the Prime Ministerial debates were on the whole "a good thing", probably about as good as, if not better than, any other form of political communication could be.'<sup>94</sup> Understandably, Adam Boulton, moderator of the Sky programme and long-time war-horse on behalf of debates, puts his name to a rather more forceful conclusion: 'we did what television does best and deployed our unique selling point by staging a series of live mass audience events – this time on the important political issues of the day ... At last, television did its job at election time.'<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> YouGov surveys for BBC, ITV and Sky, over 1,000 sample, fieldwork various dates Apr.–May 2010.

<sup>90</sup> YouGov survey for Coleman, *Leaders in the Living Room*.

<sup>91</sup> Newman, #UKelection2010 (RISJ), 2010).

<sup>92</sup> Quoted *ibid*.

<sup>93</sup> Blumler, 'Voters' Responses'.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>95</sup> Adam Boulton and Tom D. C. Roberts, 'The Election Debates', in Wring et al., *Political Communication*.

### 3.3. *Game versus Substance*

American academics have long recognised that in assessing debates, there is an important distinction to be made between their direct impact and what is described as the ‘contamination’ of how opinions are formed through other media coverage of them. Much of the criticism of debates focuses on how far surrounding commentary becomes a game of ‘winners and losers’, the concentration on ‘gaffes’, on appearance, style and tactics, as against the substance of policy, solutions, party records and relevant leadership qualities. Coleman and his colleagues approached their media analysis – across a number of ‘quality’ and ‘tabloid’ newspapers as well as some BBC and non-BBC news programmes – by scaling so-called ‘game’ and ‘substance’ references. They point out that it would be ‘churlish to expect the media to report debates as if they were academic seminars’ in the heat and drama of an election campaign – but their task was to explore where the balance lay:

*‘Had most media coverage focused solely upon the debates as a strategic political game, the substantive richness of the debates themselves might have been swamped by an ocean of mediated froth. If, on the other hand, the media coverage had simply attended to the dry substance of the leaders’ declared positions, the rhetorical force of the debates as dramatising moments in the campaign might have been undermined. For democratic citizenship to be well served, a sensitive mixture of coverage is needed ...’<sup>96</sup>*

This was precisely the conundrum which the negotiators themselves had wrestled with in the long winter months of hammering out a suitable format for the debates, as they sought the appropriate territory somewhere between frivolous and dull. Where did the rest of the media settle in covering the debates?

According to Coleman’s research, the level of ‘substantive’ references within all the analysed media coverage increased as the campaign went on. Overall, it concluded, ‘the British media rose to the occasion ... they helped to capture the public imagination by offering a broad and compelling mix between substantive and game-based narratives’. This suggests that, once journalists overcame their initial excitement, the perennial dilemma in political communications, between engagement and seriousness, was better served by the debates than the sceptics feared. ‘Is it too much to ask for televised debates to illuminate the multifaceted questions of the day while at the same time dramatising the complexities involved in evaluating political performances?’ asks Coleman, rhetorically, concluding: ‘The success of the 2010 debates as both appealing *and* enlightening media events suggests that this can be done.’<sup>97</sup>

But that is not a verdict which would be universally accepted. Steve Richards’s warning that the important issues would not ‘get a look in’ was for some (not necessarily including Richards himself) fully borne out. The debates themselves did cover a wide range of the key policy issues, including immigration, health, crime, pensions, taxation, Afghanistan and Iraq, Europe, climate change, and so on. It is unlikely these issues would have had such an opportunity to register with the ‘marginally attentive’ citizen during previous campaigns. There is certainly a post-election argument that the parties’

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<sup>96</sup> Coleman, *Leaders in the Living Room*.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

economic policies were insufficiently set out and tested – but whether that can be laid at the door of the debates is a different matter. Few politicians who know grim news is coming volunteer to highlight the pain just as they are asking voters for support, no matter what the form of political communication. It may be fair to suggest, though, that the debates might have played their part in distracting media scrutiny. Deliberately, the format of the debates was geared towards giving the leaders the opportunity to question each other. That is not, therefore, a forum where issues none of them want to discuss is likely to receive forensic probing – and that would be a telling weakness if debates were the only form of scrutiny during the campaign. It is why the BBC also pushed hard to continue the more traditional long-form TV interviews with the party leaders, conducted again in 2010 by Jeremy Paxman, as well as the shorter, but potentially equally testing encounters on Radio 4's *Today* and elsewhere. Richards's argument has some resonance, though, in that it was difficult for these other areas of scrutiny to receive their customary attention, given the hoop-la which surrounded the debates.

Ivor Gaber argues that the reporting of the 2010 campaign was 'totally different' because of the leaders' debates and that this was a 'transformative moment' in campaign reporting: 'The debates not only had a dramatic impact themselves, but also, by their intensification of attention on the leadership issue played an important part in making 2010 a virtually policy-free campaign.'<sup>98</sup> Such a conclusion can only be reached by dismissing the content of the debates themselves as having any bearing on genuine discussion of policy. Although the YouGov surveys indicated that more than two-thirds of respondents felt they did know more about the policies of each party as a result of the debates, they did not, it is true, face a quiz to test that self-assessment. There is, then, a distinct strand of criticism that the nature of debates and the 'game' element automatically focuses too much attention on the question of leadership at the expense of policy and that this represents a fundamental shift: voters are being encouraged to make a judgement based on their perception of the competence of the individual candidate more than – perhaps, as Gaber would have it, even excluding – a broader assessment of the party's policies. The leaders may be actually discussing policy, the argument goes, but the prism through which the electorate are engaging in the campaign remains limited to the leadership qualities of the candidates – their performance, rather than the comparable content of what they are saying. 'An inescapable problem with screen electioneering', according to the newspaperman Max Hastings, 'is that television is a peerless medium of impression, but a chronically flawed medium of analysis.'<sup>99</sup>

This concern raised its head during the campaign when Labour strategists seemed to have become alarmed that the very dominance of the debates themselves was, in their view, failing to deliver what they had hoped would be a consequence of agreeing to them: the opportunity for the electorate to identify contrasts in policy, where they believed – ironically – their man would score well. In between the second and third debates, Labour tried to recruit both Conservative and Liberal Democrat rivals in sending a joint letter to the broadcasters, complaining that 'the focus on the debates, both the process surrounding them, and the polling before and after which

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<sup>98</sup> Ivor Gaber, 'The Transformation of Campaign Reporting: The 2010 UK General Election. Revolution or Evolution?', in Wring et al., *Political Communication*.

<sup>99</sup> Max Hastings, 'The Day British Politics Turned into the X-Factor', Mail Online, 16 Apr. 2011: [www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1377506/How-1st-TV-leaders-debate-turned-British-politics-The-X-Factor.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1377506/How-1st-TV-leaders-debate-turned-British-politics-The-X-Factor.html).

they have attracted, has dramatically reduced the amount of airtime dedicated to the scrutiny of the policies of the parties'.<sup>100</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly ten days before polling day, the other parties declined the invitation, the Conservatives describing it as a 'desperate whinge'. It is hard to sustain the argument that opportunities for policy scrutiny were not taking place at all: Channel 4 broadcast an hour-long debate between the three economic spokesmen – *Ask the Chancellors* – and the BBC's *Daily Politics*, for example, conducted nine 45-minute debates involving various party spokespeople, covering different policy areas, during the campaign; in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there were peak-time debates between the respective party leaders produced by the different broadcasters; the usual array of BBC news and current affairs programmes, not to mention the comprehensive online offering, dutifully compiled topic grids to ensure all main policy areas were suitably aired. For the most attentive and dedicated citizen, there was no shortage of material available beyond the Prime Ministerial debates. A more persuasive argument is not that such scrutiny and policy discussion was absent from the campaign, but that the unprecedented noise around the debates (the 'hysteria', according to Steve Richards) – especially the dramatic changes in poll ratings and the surge of 'Cleggmania' – made it that much harder to hear the usual low-level rumble of a normal election campaign. There is no doubt that, in newspapers and much of the media, less room was available for the 'normal' coverage and the parties themselves switched their focus as they went along. Their planning of the entire campaign soon revolved around the Thursday night peaks, not just with extensive preparation time for the leader but an acknowledgement that little else would penetrate news agendas for at least half each week during the body of the campaign.

### 3.4. *So What was Lost?*

It is worth examining for a moment, however, the value of the 'normal' coverage which it is supposed was being usurped. The pattern of early morning press conferences, battle-bus regional campaigning and high-profile broadcast interviews became established from the 1970s and probably reached its zenith in 1987. But as parties sought to minimise journalistic trouble-making, by the turn of the century the press conferences were already in decline – in any case, their impact was often confined to shaping the media agenda, rather than being of direct significance to the electorate at large. Political speeches and rallies were also losing favour, the whistle-stop tours became dominated by safe photo-opportunities and choreographed local supporters (with the occasional off-script incident, much to the relief of the accompanying – and increasingly junior – reporters). The less engaging the campaigns, the more susceptible they became to maverick episodes, such as Jennifer's Ear, Prescott's Punch, the hunt for Oliver Letwin,<sup>101</sup> and – this time – 'bigot-gate'. These recent British general election campaigns have tended to lack focus: for the 'marginally attentive citizen', there was not enough of a narrative to be drawn into. So if the debates may have rather overachieved in that regard, what they replaced was scarcely an invigorating, vibrant

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<sup>100</sup> Labour Party press release, 26 Apr. 2010.

<sup>101</sup> 'Jennifer's Ear': controversy over Labour party election broadcast during 1992 campaign; 'Prescott's Punch': Labour's deputy leader, John Prescott, hit a protestor in Rhyl during the 2001 campaign; Oliver Letwin: Conservative treasury spokesman who went to ground in the 2001 campaign after claims he was the source of a story about proposed spending cuts.

engagement of the electorate. Since 1997, when the BBC's substantial extension of the evening news bulletin to cater – as executives saw it – for the extra public service obligations of election time, resulted in significant viewer resistance, broadcasters – on TV at least – have been wary of force-feeding their audiences with too much campaign politics. Subjecting those viewers/voters who are traditionally less interested in politics to 'normal' campaign fare seemed more likely to disengage them from the election than encourage them to become involved. So whilst there may have been more attention directed at the important coverage of policy difference for the benefit of those who were interested in the election, their less devoted fellow citizens were beginning to turn off rather than turn out. There is at least an argument, then, that far from 'squeezing out' the established and valued elements of British election campaigns, the Prime Ministerial debates were seized on with such relish precisely because they were filling a partial vacuum of voter disengagement.

It may well be that such a phenomenon is unlikely to be repeated. A considerable amount of the coverage revolved around the novelty of the debates, which had been so long coming. Temporarily, they seemed to have obscured what had become the more routine attitudes towards politics and politicians – cynicism was, for a while at least, suppressed. Coleman reports that the debates had a particular impact on Liberal Democrat voters as well as on younger voters (the former being significantly better represented among the latter than within other age groups).<sup>102</sup> The pledge and following controversy over tuition fees notwithstanding (and not pausing here to analyse the contrast in Lib Dem fortunes pre- and post-election) it is hardly a leap of imagination to suppose that these voters may approach a second set of debates with a rather more knowing attitude, less susceptible to mania – especially, perhaps, of the type which gravitated towards Nick Clegg.

For many, though, British general elections 'will never be the same again', a view expressed by supporters and opponents alike. For Steve Richards the impact goes beyond the campaigns and risks changing the whole way British politics works – a development he describes as 'dangerous'.<sup>103</sup> Debates will, he argues, cast a disproportionate shadow over the entire Parliament: an opposition leader will no longer painstakingly develop their party over time into being an electable alternative government; the impact of the debates would overwhelm in a matter of weeks whatever impression had been made in the years since the last election. Nick Clegg 'might as well have taken a holiday' from the day he became leader until the first TV debate. According to Richards, 'Ed Miliband must be tempted to do something similar to seem fresh and new when the electorate takes a look at the first debate of the next campaign.'<sup>104</sup> This, it is argued, will have a deadening effect on the normal political ebb and flow throughout the Parliament, ultimately, an unhealthy – even 'dangerous' – path for British political culture. Fellow political columnist, David Aaronovitch, over at *The Times*, took precisely the opposite view: 'the debates are a further triumph of the people over the politicians' he proclaimed the day after the first debate, 'the significance ... is that they invite you to meet your new boss. And it's you,' he told his readers.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Coleman, *Leaders in the Living Room*.

<sup>103</sup> Richards, interview, 2011.

<sup>104</sup> Steve Richards, 'Were we Duped by Those TV Debates?', *Independent*, 14 Apr. 2011.

<sup>105</sup> David Aaronovitch, 'Last Night we Saw the New Masters in Action'; *The Times*, 16 Apr. 2010.

But for both Steve Richards and Andrew Roberts, the increased engagement resulting from the debates has come at just too high a cost to the structures and culture of our political ethos. Roberts's belief that Britain is now 'lost to the presidential system'<sup>106</sup> captures the most commonly expressed fear of the debates as the final surrender of Westminster politics to invading transatlantic political forces. Even some enthusiasts – including Alastair Stewart, who moderated the ITV debate – cheerfully accept that they have moved British politics closer to a presidential model.

### 3.5. The UK 'Presidency'

What is meant, in this context, by 'presidential'? It is most often used with reference to the US model and is usually coloured with a faint pejorative tinge. Setting aside the wider, academic discussion of the British constitution, the role of the prime minister within Cabinet responsibility and how it compares to presidential models of separated powers, the key element is the issue of a direct mandate. Presidents are elected as individuals (in effect, anyway, notwithstanding the electoral college in the US) and therefore exercise a personal executive authority. They are not simply a chief executive of the government, but, in the US and France, for example, are also head of state. There, of course, is an immediate sensitivity for the traditionalist in Britain – our political Prime Minister must not be allowed to tread on the toes of the monarch by assuming the pretensions of representing the nation as a president does. But the critics are normally concentrating less on the formal distinctions and more often on what they see as a 'personalisation' of political authority. The Prime Minister as an individual is, they fear, becoming too powerful. This, it is argued, distorts Britain's traditional constitutional arrangements which, until the early twentieth century, barely seemed to recognise the position of Prime Minister at all. Power, according to Walter Bagehot, resided in the Cabinet, sovereignty lay in Parliament. The concentration of power in the modern Prime Minister/President, therefore, threatens both collective Cabinet government and the holy grail of parliamentary sovereignty, especially if, at election time, an impression is given to the electorate that they are voting directly for one of the party leaders to take on this executive role – that they are, in effect, voting for a presidential Prime Minister. The implication is that this development undermines Parliament – the kernel of British democracy – and its most central characteristic, the relationship of the voters with their own constituency representative.

The argument is not that the Prime Ministerial Debates of 2010 have suddenly upset this established constitutional arrangement – but that they are the culmination of years of gradual erosion, caused largely by media influence, more specifically the growth of celebrity culture contaminating political life and placing more and more power in the hands of a single politician. It is a view set out bluntly by Peter Hennessy, in looking at the reasons why he thought the premiership was 'much more powerful' under Tony Blair than it had been under Churchill and Attlee:

*one is the intrusive nature of the media, which has exploded in the last twenty-five years. It focuses on the number one usually to the exclusion of virtually everyone else. Even with subtler prime ministers like Major or Callaghan that*

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<sup>106</sup> Andrew Roberts, '2010 The Great Debate Election', *Sunday Telegraph*, 9 May 2010.

*was true, let alone the monstrous engines of self-publicity like Harold Wilson, Mrs Thatcher and Tony Blair...In the eyes of the electorate the role of the Prime Minister seems to have increased. The real paradox is a country so much weaker in relative terms, [but] a Prime Minister so much stronger in relative terms within the orbit in which they operate.*<sup>107</sup>

Curiously, Tony Blair's own view rather matches this impression, claiming that there had been a tendency to underplay the importance of the leader. He argues that left/right distinctions now matter less and individual policies can always be changed – what people really want to know is how someone will react to events: 'Unless policies are defined to a very clear degree and are way off-centre, the character, likeability and personality of the leader are of paramount importance. They can determine the election ... Simple as that.'<sup>108</sup> Presumably, though, he did not feel that debates were the vehicle to cast light on these characteristics. For many, including some of Blair's own colleagues, his view translated directly into a more presidential style of government which was having a detrimental impact on the constitutional balance: 'Tony's acting more like a president than a prime minister', Mo Mowlam claimed after leaving his government, 'and in that situation the cabinet itself is dead'.<sup>109</sup> The Labour MP Graham Allen, a campaigner for a written constitution, reflects, though, that 'this is something which has evolved over the last 100 years and isn't solely the product of Tony Blair'. Allen argues that

*only the term presidency conveys the extraordinary multi-layered role of the British prime minister, which is unlike any other office in the Western world ... head of our government ... principal policy maker, advocate, ideologue ... media manager ... principal legislator ... commander-in-chief ... leader and chief executive of a political party and, of course, a constituency MP... a unique combination of powers.*<sup>110</sup>

From a perspective at the end of the Blair era, Anthony King seems to be taking the same view, if more colloquially, in asserting that the Prime Minister is 'likely to be cock of the walk'.<sup>111</sup> But King is stepping back and analysing a seminal contribution to constitutional theory by one of his most eminent predecessors which was actually written more than a hundred years earlier – a telling rebuttal of Allen's notion of a century evolving towards Blair's 'presidency'. Sydney Low, in *The Governance of England*, wrote: 'Much of the authority of the Cabinet has insensibly passed over to that of the Premier.' Low saw the Prime Minister as the focus of power: his ability to appoint – and dismiss – the Cabinet, his likely position as the 'people's choice' emanating from the previous general election; and the growth of the practice of premiers working with small groups – or individual Cabinet Ministers – rather than with the Cabinet as a whole. Parliament may have 'the show of power' and 'nominal authority', according to Low, but it is the Prime Minister within *his* Cabinet which 'is more powerful and has drawn to itself many attributes which the Commons are still imagined to possess. The Electorate, fully conscious of its own influence under an extended franchise, wield a

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<sup>107</sup> Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: The Office and its Holders since 1945* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

<sup>108</sup> Tony Blair, *A Journey* (Hutchinson, 2010).

<sup>109</sup> Mo Mowlam interview for Michael Cockerell's film *Cabinet Confidential*, BBC Two, 17 Nov. 2001.

<sup>110</sup> Graham Allen, *The Last Prime Minister: Being Honest about the UK Presidency* (Imprint Academic, 2003).

<sup>111</sup> Anthony King, *The British Constitution* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

direct instead of a delegated authority.<sup>112</sup> Writing in 1904, Low was proposing even then that the Prime Minister could no longer be – if he could ever have been – considered merely as ‘first among equals’. Anthony King himself takes up this theme in demolishing the argument that Britain has since moved towards a more presidential system:

*the idea has grown up that the constitution in this respect has changed and that the British prime ministership has become a sort of super presidency, an office endowed with plenipotentiary and almost preternatural powers ... the historical record contradicts the prevailing image. Myth obscures reality. The facts do not speak for themselves.*<sup>113</sup>

King points out the broad range of styles of premiership in terms of their dominance, that it is a matter not just of their characteristics, but also of their political circumstances and their consequent personal authority:

*the line from prime minister to prime minister is ... not straight but jagged ... through the twentieth century into the nineteenth, it is most unlikely that it would register a steady, or even an unsteady, increase in prime ministerial power. Gladstone is followed by Rosebery, Salisbury by Balfour, Balfour by Campbell-Bannerman ... and so forth.*

More recently, Margaret Thatcher was succeeded – and Tony Blair preceded – by John Major, surely the least ‘presidential’ of Prime Ministers flanked by two of the most. And was Attlee, in opting to develop a British nuclear weapon with the minimal involvement of colleagues, really so much less presidential than Blair? How far was government run by the Cabinet the night Macmillan sacked a third of it? Blair’s own Chief of Staff concedes the power and importance of members of the Cabinet: ‘The prime minister continually has to ensure that they are with him if he is to remain in office.’<sup>114</sup> But he too dismisses as ‘nonsense’ the suggestion of a past golden age: ‘The division is not ... between Cabinet government and no Cabinet government but between a weak leader and a strong one.’

To say that the 2010 campaign was dominated by the leaders’ debates is without controversy; but does it then follow that the campaign was dominated by the leaders themselves in a way which had not happened before? On that, opinion is much more divided. As was noted in Chapter 1, during the 1970s the dominance of each of the leaders in terms of the proportion of their parties’ overall coverage was 60% and more. Direct comparisons are hazardous, but by 2001 and 2005, that figure was closer to 40% – suggesting at least the possibility that this particular measure for ‘presidentialisation’ (crude as it may be) might have been heading in the opposite direction to that indicated by conventional wisdom. On that measure, 2010 certainly suggests an increase – to around 56% according to analysis by Deacon and Wring<sup>115</sup> – but comparatively modest given the dominance and novelty of the debates and – arguably – still short of the levels of leader dominance in the Wilson–Heath era. Other measures, it must be said, entirely contradict that assertion. Through assessing front-page stories and editorials, Scammell and Beckett conclude that the ‘qualities of the

<sup>112</sup> Sydney Low quoted in King, *British Constitution*.

<sup>113</sup> King, *British Constitution*.

<sup>114</sup> Jonathan Powell, *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World* (Bodley Head, 2010).

<sup>115</sup> David Deacon and Dominic Wring, ‘Reporting the 2010 General Election’, in Wring et al., *Political Communication*.

leaders' accounted for twice or even three times as much coverage in 2010 as was the case in 2005:

*this was an extraordinarily leader-focussed contest, even by recent standards of personalised campaigns. It was not just that the debates themselves intensified attention to the leaders and their performances; it was also that they cast a presidential framing over the entire contest.*<sup>116</sup>

Is leader dominance the same thing as 'presidential'? And in that context, was 2010 so different to many of the dozen previous elections of the 'television era'? The focus over much of the period since the 1970s – on battle-bus photo-ops, high-profile interviews, party broadcasts, and poster advertising – has invariably placed the leader centre-stage. The personification of a party and its policies through the image of the leader is a natural consequence of the demand at election time for parties to speak with a single unified voice. It was not a unique feature of the 2010 election for senior colleagues of each of the party leaders to find themselves largely eclipsed from the media spotlight. If exceptions ever prove rules, the double-headed ice-cream campaign of Blair and Brown in 2005 was itself unusual and motivated by Labour's political imperative to counter an impression of division. Ironically, the Lib Dem campaign in 2010 began with a battle-bus as devoted to Vince Cable as it was to Nick Clegg, so the latter's then relative anonymity could be boosted by the greater popularity and higher profile of his colleague. Both these strategies illustrate the argument that in election campaigns it is invariably personalities that count in engaging the voters – and that is the case no more now than when Gladstone stormed through Midlothian in the 1870s and Macmillan seized on television from the late 1950s.

When opponents of debates complain that they put too much attention on the party leaders and play into the notion of increasing presidentialisation, they are ignoring not only Britain's constitutional position – the established dominance of the Prime Minister (albeit relative to the political circumstances) – but also the reality of how voters relate to election campaigns. Both have been embedded since long before the advent of so-called celebrity culture. Anthony King is clear in insisting there is little evidence to support the view that prime ministers are more dominant than they were in previous generations. He does point out, though, that Prime Ministers now have more resources, in terms of their own staff – aides and advisers – than used to be the case, with the creation, almost, of a 'Prime Minister's Department'. This gives them an ability to initiate and influence in a way not possible when 10 Downing Street was, as King puts it, an 'informal man-a-boy-and-a-dog operation'.<sup>117</sup> Even so, according to Vernon Bogdanor (and he was speaking at the height of Blair's dominance), the centralised power of the UK Prime Minister has been rather less than that of counterparts in the other key Westminster-based parliamentary systems – and yet

*no-one in Australia or Canada believes that these departments make their prime ministers more like presidents or dictators ... A great deal of nonsense has been talked about our own prime minister assuming presidential or*

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<sup>116</sup> Margaret Scammell and Charlie Beckett, 'Labour No More: The Press', in Kavanagh and Cowley, *British General Election*.

<sup>117</sup> King, *British Constitution*.

*dictatorial powers ... To achieve success in many areas of policy, one needs a stronger centre.*<sup>118</sup>

It is this structural evolution – which David Cameron has also tussled with as he asserts influence on policy areas such as the NHS and crime – which has had a rather greater impact on the changing role of the premiership than any notion of ‘presidentialisation’ through media profile, celebrity – or, come to that, televised debates. Individual prime ministers can be dominant and considerable figures – even celebrated ones – as Thatcher, Blair, Gladstone, Disraeli, Churchill, Wilson, Heath (according to King, one of the most dominant) have all demonstrated – but that does not make them presidential, nor does it indicate any trend towards ‘presidentialisation’. Cameron’s domination or otherwise of government owes much more to the election result which denied him a majority and to his relationship with his party and coalition colleagues – that is, to the circumstances of his premiership – than it does to his performance in the TV election debates.

None of this is to say, however, that the way a leader comes across during the campaign – and especially, perhaps, during debates – cannot have a real and significant impact on that wider political landscape. One of the interesting post-election questions for which there can be no definitive answer is: could Nick Clegg have been appointed Deputy Prime Minister by Cameron if it hadn’t been for the impact he made in the debates? Even if one limited answer is that it would probably have been more difficult, given the Lib Dem leader’s pre-debate profile, then it is not difficult to conceive that the shape – even the existence – of the Coalition agreement could not necessarily have been taken for granted. Big political events – and the debates were certainly that – have the capacity to change the tone, vary the possibilities, move the narrative. The personalities and the skills of the politicians involved are an intrinsic and inevitable component of that political evolution, not just a trivial distraction from the purity of policy consideration.

### 3.6. ‘Simon Cowellisation’

Are the debates part of that political evolution – helping to change and improve the ways voters can be engaged with the difficult judgments needed at election time? Or are they a culmination of the corruption of our politics into cheap reality television? The latter plays into the complaint about ‘presidentialisation’ – or ‘personalisation’ – of the prime ministership, that more attention and greater power have helped turn the role, indeed, politics itself, into another branch of the ‘celebrity’ culture. The debates, it is said, risk turning serious politics into light entertainment and are, by definition, too shallow a tool for proper scrutiny. It is at the heart of Andrew Roberts’s dismay at the debates becoming the apotheosis of so-called X-Factor politics. Writing just after polling day, Roberts lamented that the trivialisation could not now be reversed:

*To watch Gordon Brown, who was, after all, the statesman who kept us out of the euro, having to tell clunkingly bad gags about how Cameron and Clegg ‘remind me of my boys at bathtime, squabbling in the bath’, was to recognize how television inevitably infantilises and cheapens our democracy.*<sup>119</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Vernon Bogdanor, oral evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration, 22 Mar. 2000.

<sup>119</sup> Roberts, ‘2010 The Great Debate Election’.

It is, says Roberts, the ‘Simon Cowellisation of British politics’ which has been ‘completely altered ... in the long term’ by the debates. ‘In future, party leaders will not be chosen on the basis of their intelligence, honesty, sagacity, courage, or leadership abilities, but rather on their debating skills and ability to charm television viewers.’ Max Hastings, writing on the first anniversary of the first debate, put it a little more bluntly: ‘It’s doubtful that this country will ever again have a Prime Minister who is honest and brilliant, but looks ugly.’<sup>120</sup> (Disappointingly, he does not produce a list of who he considers have been our past honest, brilliant, ugly prime ministers.) Azeem Ibrahim, the entrepreneur-academic, said before the campaign that, ‘far from encouraging a democratic choice, [TV debates] encourage us to judge the leaders in politics with the values of Hollywood ... cogent policies take second place to whiter teeth or a stronger jawline’.<sup>121</sup> Afterwards, Ibrahim exclaims that ‘the power of these debates to set the agenda of British politics is extraordinary’, but it is based on the ‘fluffiest and least deserving’ criteria, such as Clegg’s knack of looking straight at the camera and Cameron’s decision in the second debate to ruffle up his hair a bit: ‘the scary thing is that these kind of judgments are now more important than ever in British politics, thanks to the debates’ pre-eminence. Is this good for Britain?’<sup>122</sup> It would lead, Ibrahim answers himself, to qualified candidates not putting themselves forward as leaders because they ‘lacked a full head of hair’. Television debates, says Ibrahim, ‘are bad for politics and awful for governance’.<sup>123</sup>

All these critics fear that party leaders will, from now on, as a direct result of the debates, be chosen for the wrong reasons. It has to be said that evidence so far is restricted to the replacement of Gordon Brown: it is perhaps a question to leave hanging whether or not party members, Labour MPs, and the unions were considering the ‘Simon Cowellisation’ of politics as they decided which of the Milibands they favoured.

The allegation of trivialisation is confronted by Stephen Coleman, who insists that ‘democratic politics, if it is to be accessible, engaging and inclusive, cannot retreat into a rarified vacuum from which anything less than lofty rationalism is viewed with disdain’.<sup>124</sup> Anthony King too dismisses the notion of a connection between power and celebrity as

*tenuous to the point of non-existence ... Even if prime ministers had become increasingly powerful, which they have not, their greater celebrity could not account for their greater power: their celebrity, relative to their contemporaries, has not become greater.*<sup>125</sup>

The catch-all accusation of ‘presidentialisation’ is rooted in the ambiguous but often unspoken attitudes of Britain towards the United States: obsessed by it, in comparison to closer countries whose languages and politics we don’t understand; yet dismissive of it as having a rather inferior and shallow brand of democratic politics. It remains at the heart of the suspicion that holding television debates between those who aspire to lead us is peculiarly

<sup>120</sup> Hastings, ‘X-Factor’.

<sup>121</sup> Azeem Ibrahim (Harvard Kennedy School’s International Security Program, research fellow), ‘Televised Political Debates Dumb Down Democracy’, Huffington Post, 8 Mar. 2010: [www.huffingtonpost.com/azeem-ibrahim/televised-political-debat\\_b\\_488833.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/azeem-ibrahim/televised-political-debat_b_488833.html).

<sup>122</sup> Azeem Ibrahim, ‘Televised Debates are Bad for Democracy’, Huffington Post, 11 June 2011: [www.huffingtonpost.com/azeem-ibrahim/televised-debates-are-bad\\_b\\_581785.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/azeem-ibrahim/televised-debates-are-bad_b_581785.html).

<sup>123</sup> Ibrahim, ‘Debates Dumb Down’.

<sup>124</sup> Stephen Coleman, Reuters Institute/BBC David Butler lecture, 7 Feb. 2011.

<sup>125</sup> King, *British Constitution*.

inappropriate to our parliamentary democracy – ‘un-British’ and even a touch vulgar.

Likewise, the attitude which dismisses engagement of more people in the election as ‘trivialising’ fails to grasp the central role of communication in a participatory democracy. What are the comparative benefits and damage to Britain’s political health: four and a half hours of quite earnest debate on prime-time television or – say – the *Sun*’s famous Kinnock as light-bulb front page? Or Gordon Brown’s appearance with an Elvis impersonator? Or John Major’s soap-box, Harold Wilson’s pipe, the Blair–Brown ice-creams? Or Margaret Thatcher holding a calf for 13 minutes to accommodate dozens of photographers? They are all forms of political communication which convey deliberate messages to voters, some more successfully than others. They carry images and symbols, warnings and reassurance. They can strike a transformational note or fall on deaf ears. Of all the things which have had a detrimental impact on British politics in recent years – taking in sleaze and expenses – it takes a particular sort of constitutional anxiety to worry that Prime Ministerial debates are high up on the list of harmful events.

The YouGov surveys after the 2010 election pointed to a widespread welcome for the debates, even if some of that positive reaction was tempered by a desire to see changes next time. More than three-quarters of respondents thought future debates ‘a good idea’, though with around half of them saying they should be ‘done differently’.<sup>126</sup> Such was their impact that even the severest critics seem to regard their future presence at election time as a done deal – a permanent change to be regretted, rather than an open question worth campaigning about.

That the party leaders were cast in such a central role through the debates was not some sort of constitutional aberration distorting Westminster’s traditional arrangements by putting the finishing touches on an alien presidency. It was a recognition of the reality of British politics – that party leaders *are* seeking to be ‘cock of the walk’; that the electorate *will* base judgements on perceptions of trust, leadership, personality – as well, maybe, as on some understanding of important policy differences. The Prime Ministerial debates engaged more people in those judgements, including many who were young or ‘marginally attentive’. To dismiss that as politics according to ‘white teeth’ and a ‘full head of hair’ would seem to be something of an underestimation of the electorate and of the party members who choose their leaders. Sometimes – and for some people – how voting decisions are made may well involve elements which others might regard as rather shallow. Even if that is, for some, trivialising politics, then it may be a better option than marginalising it. And it may be that the rise and decline of ‘Cleggmania’ was a demonstration that, while debates have an impact on the electorate, they do not prevent voters stepping back and considering the wider perspective before entering the booth.

Since 1959, television has become the medium through which many outside the so-called Westminster village have related to important world events – from the moon-landing to the fall of the Berlin Wall. But British politics was slow in realising the power of television to communicate with its own constituency in a constructive and engaging relationship – politicians here were more likely to see that power as something to be feared and resisted rather than embraced and used. As the world outside – and especially the next generation – continues adapting to new media, for now, at least,

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<sup>126</sup> Commissioned for Coleman, *Leaders in the Living Room*.

reabsorbing television, Britain's politicians finally, in 2010, seemed to have acknowledged its effectiveness in communicating directly during elections – decades after most other democratic countries. Few developments in the political landscape can claim such levels of approval as that achieved by the TV election debates. In an environment where so much of political life prompts a negative reaction among the public at large, it seems barely worth asking the question 'are they here to stay?': how could they possibly not be?

## 4. Will the UK have Election Debates Next Time?

### 4.1. 'Different Political Chemistry'?

The assumption of almost everyone – critics and supporters alike – is that such was the impact of the Prime Ministerial debates in 2010, they are surely here to stay – that the electoral landscape in the UK has changed permanently. Having finally overturned half a century's status quo, the new status quo already seems established and perhaps as hard to reverse as the old. 'It will be a brave leader indeed', says Sky's Adam Boulton, 'who ducks treading where Cameron, Brown and Clegg have gone before.'<sup>127</sup> The BBC's Sue English, who chaired the negotiations last time, says 'if we have to do it all again on the same template, we will'.<sup>128</sup>

But the context next time – be it 2015, the end of a newly fixed parliamentary term, or sooner – will be very different from 2010. The public expectation of debates will mean that any attempt to explain their absence would in future have to pass a far higher test of popular political scrutiny than has been the case over the previous 50 years. Previously, the pros and cons of debates were largely limited to the opinionati around Westminster and a small band of academic enthusiasts. After the tumult of 2010, any suggestion they won't happen next time would risk provoking far greater consternation and much broader public controversy. The traditional stance, adopted mainly by incumbents, that TV debates are alien to our parliamentary culture, with its House of Commons exchanges between the party leaders, is almost certainly now unusable as an argument to be deployed formally or publicly by the parties. The insistence that debates are moving us further towards a 'presidential' system will still be pressed by critics observing from the sidelines and in the longer term may well prove to be a persistent theme. But it is unlikely to be an argument used by any party leader, however reluctant they might be about taking part, as an explanation which would pass muster with the electorate without some damage to credibility. As to whether elections risk being 'trivialised' by debates, that is still an argument which will be made by some – and perhaps felt by more – but the evidence of engagement, especially of young voters, and the serious content of the 2010 encounters, has certainly, for the time being, diminished the strength of the 'politics by X-Factor' case. Detailed content analysis of the debates concluded

*that the debates had significant policy content and, by implication, that attentive viewers might have learned much from them ... despite the reservations expressed before the campaign, the debates did contain a policy core.*<sup>129</sup>

Yet the idea that debates are now a certainty both ignores the importance of hard-nosed political calculation and the experience of other countries. The Nixon–Kennedy debates of 1960 may have established the United States as front-runners in the staging of televised debates, but less remembered is the 16-year gap which followed during the Johnson–Nixon presidencies, before incumbent Gerald Ford – lagging in the polls in 1976 – agreed to take on

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<sup>127</sup> Boulton and Roberts. 'The Election Debates'.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Nicholas Allen, Judith Bara, and John Bartle, 'The Televised Debates in the 2010 UK General Election: Content and Impact', Political Studies Association Annual Conference, London, 19–21 Apr. 2011.

Jimmy Carter. In 1992, there was a real chance that George Bush Senior would refuse to debate Bill Clinton. Even with a formal Commission on Presidential Debates, there is no guarantee that events will go according to plan – in 2000, it struggled to forge an agreement between Al Gore and George Bush Junior. The pattern of debates in Australia, if not instructive in the sense of being applicable to the UK now, does at least demonstrate that ‘breaking the duck’ with debates is no guarantee of a repeat performance. In 1983, Opposition Leader Bob Hawke had taunted Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser for refusing a television debate. The following year, then Prime Minister Hawke had little option but to inaugurate Australian debates against the new Opposition Leader, Andrew Peacock. Despite going on to lose the election, Peacock was seen to have boosted his party’s vote through his appearance. Come the 1987 Australian election, therefore, and Hawke – once as vehement a supporter of televised debates as David Cameron was in the run-up to 2010 – this time declined the invitation. Though he changed his mind again in 1990 by agreeing to debate Peacock, despite being ahead in the polls, it seems largely to have still been a matter of political calculation: ‘[Hawke] was in danger of appearing undemocratic if he refused to face Peacock for a second time’.<sup>130</sup>

Similarly, in Canada: the first debate took place in 1968, but the second not until 1979. Circumstances here were certainly different, not least because the initial encounter – very much on ‘joint press conference’ lines – was regarded as dull. The involvement of leaders of smaller parties, together with the complications caused by the imperatives of Canada’s bilingualism, presented particular difficulties in establishing televised election debates. There is, however, one pertinent warning from another Canadian failure – in 1980 – of why the continuation of debates is not inevitable, just because they have happened one or more times: animosity between the leading political parties was so great that, only a year after the previous debate, there was insufficient common ground to form a basis for negotiation.

So although there is no doubt that publicly veto-ing debates in the traditional way will now be much more difficult for reluctant party leaders, many of the other political realities of weighing electoral advantage will remain largely unchanged. As the debate enthusiast Stephen Coleman warns, ‘we cannot rule out the possibility that the next election, with its different political chemistry, might return to the norm where one or more of the parties sabotage the prospects’.<sup>131</sup> If the key factors which have stood in the way in the past are used to assess the prospects for the future, how confident can such debate supporters be of an assumption that they are here to stay? What strategy would be adopted by a party that was 15 or 20 points ahead in the polls? What would be whispered by the advisers to a Prime Minister whose profile and standing was head and shoulders above his rivals? How would an unpopular old stager regard a new but unknown leader displaying charisma, freshness, and an engaging TV style? How would the candidates turn up at the right time in the right place with an agreed format if hostilities between them were so great they had not been able to sit in the same room to find the common ground? ‘Of course, we do favour debates *in principle*, but ...’

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<sup>130</sup> Coleman, *Televised Leaders’ Debates*.

<sup>131</sup> Coleman, *Leaders in the Living Room*.

#### 4.2. *Same Old Hazards . . . and Some New Ones*

What might those 'buts' be? What are the eject-levers which a suddenly anxious party leader might reach for? A number of them are familiar, though they may have new characteristics: who takes part in the debates; their format and the way they are organised (including the degree of unanimity between the broadcasters); the timing and quantity of debates; the argument that they suffocate all other forms of electioneering. If all these and more are to be subject to negotiation all over again, then each has the potential for disagreement and each provides an opportunity for a lukewarm party. To these perennial headaches, however, new circumstances may throw up new difficulties. The most obvious transformation brought by the 2010 UK Parliament is the political context of Coalition government. All previous Westminster elections of the television age have been fought by two large parties, one in government, one in opposition, with a second opposition party or force of varying levels of support and importance. That will not be the case next time – among the many possibilities are that the two Coalition parties will maintain their relationship until the election campaign begins; that they will have separated some time before – perhaps acrimoniously, perhaps not; that they will have become closer and will fight the election as some sort of alliance; or that splintering has occurred. Each of these as yet unpredictable scenarios or others could have a significant impact on how debates can be organised. And although a fixed-term parliament in theory gives more certainty to the election date, an earlier unexpected one is still not impossible, with accompanying uncertainty to threaten orderly debate negotiation.

Some Labour voices were quick to grumble that to reconvene the three-leader approach if the Coalition has continued for most of the Parliament would be unfair to them as it would, in effect, be two against one. When Nick Clegg was caught still on microphone saying to David Cameron as they left a public meeting: 'if we keep doing this, we won't find anything to bloody disagree on in the bloody TV debates',<sup>132</sup> he provoked Alastair Campbell to respond, on his blog, 'why does he assume he should be there at all? It would be frankly ridiculous if two men who spend a whole Parliament saying they agree with each other suddenly pop up for TV debates pretending that actually they don't.'<sup>133</sup> Other Labour insiders, however, who have anticipated the dynamics of such a debate, rub their hands at the thought of their leader being able to take on two opponents who need to reassert their independence from each other, whilst defending a joint record – 'like shooting fish in a barrel' one savoured. Either way, although Labour will undoubtedly approach debate negotiation differently from their changed perspective out of government, in principle there is no reason to suppose that the party will not take the usual public stance of opposition in laying down a challenge to the incumbent – or incumbents. How resilient that position would be if, for example, Ed Miliband, in 2015, were to find himself in comparable circumstances to Tony Blair in 1997 – 20 points ahead in the polls – is perhaps best left at this stage to the speculative daydreaming of Labour optimists.

As for the Liberal Democrats, although they will enter the next election campaign having been in the very unaccustomed role of a Westminster party of government, they are still likely to find themselves in circumstances where they would favour debates to ensure their voice is heard among the bigger

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<sup>132</sup> Quoted BBC News Online, 24 Mar. 2011.

<sup>133</sup> 'Alastair's blog', 25 Mar. 2011.

beasts. The chance to reassert a political strand independent of their Conservative partners, together with the traditional need for the (presumably still) third party to grab attention during an election campaign, mean that unless opponents attempted to exclude them from debates, the Liberal Democrats would be first to sign up. But in the light of the 2010 debates, the politics of the Coalition, and subsequent electoral performance, it is unlikely that the presence or equality of the Liberal Democrats will not be questioned in some quarters by their opponents – not only Labour, but the SNP as well.

What, though, of incumbency and poll ratings, those traditional indicators of the likelihood of debates? Predicting political events and outcomes is a fruitless exercise, but weighing a number of possible scenarios ahead of the next election could be useful in testing the assumption that debates will, inevitably, take place again. So whilst there's little value in speculating for long about hypothetical opinion poll ratings, there may be more mileage in assessing the alternatives open to an established Prime Minister. Aides close to David Cameron insist that he agreed to debates in 2010 not for political advantage, but because 'their time had come'. Nevertheless, that in itself is a strand of the Prime Minister's broader presentation of a modernising Conservative party, placing it in a particular and not necessarily permanent political context. Whilst there is, as yet, no long-term commitment to debates nor is there evidence to suggest that Cameron will attempt the sort of volte-face carried out by Bob Hawke in 1987 and by those British predecessors of both parties who managed – at different times – to support and then oppose election debates. Yet there remain influential voices within the Conservative camp who regard Cameron's decision to take part in the 2010 debates as a strategic error, one that should not be repeated next time.

#### *4.3. Can Debates Lose the Election?*

The key question for which there is still no definitive answer is: what difference did the debates make to the result of the 2010 election? The immediate reaction – to the Lib Dems having been catapulted into the opinion poll stratosphere after the first debate, then into a position of actually losing seats come polling day – was that, despite all the hoo-ha, the debates had made no real difference to the result. That was not, however, the view either of the former Tory deputy chairman, Lord Ashcroft, who said the debates 'changed the narrative and rhythm of the campaign',<sup>134</sup> or of Gordon Brown's key strategist and negotiator, David Muir, who said the debates 'denied David Cameron a majority – simple as that'. Labour feared, according to Muir, that 'momentum behind Cameron would have built and built ... [the debates] fundamentally disrupted that and slammed the brakes on the Tory juggernaut'.<sup>135</sup>

The instincts of Muir and Ashcroft were supported by YouGov's Peter Kellner, as he sought to explain, in the days after the election, the contrast between the impact the debates seemed to have made and the actual result:

*the conventional wisdom is that this impact made no difference in the end, for the Lib Dems ended up losing seats, not gaining them. Conventional wisdom is wrong. Before the first debate, Lib Dem support averaged around 19%.*

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<sup>134</sup> Michael Ashcroft, *Minority Verdict: The Conservative Party, the Voters and the 2010 General Election* (Biteback, 2010).

<sup>135</sup> Panel discussion: 'Was TV the Real Winner of the General Election?', BAFTA event, 13 May 2010.

*Afterwards it averaged 29%. On election day it slipped back to 24%. So the party retained about half the gains that Nick Clegg secured by his performance in that debate. Without those gains, I estimate that the Lib Dems would have won 20 fewer seats: 14 more would have been won by the Tories and six by Labour. The political effect of those 20 'extra' Lib Dem seats has been huge ... David Cameron would be so close to an overall majority that he would have been Prime Minister by the evening of Friday May 7. ... So the debates did make a difference.*<sup>136</sup>

Not everyone would proclaim such a definitive verdict, pointing out that poll ratings in previous debateless elections indicate a similar pattern of Lib Dem improvement. Through strict application by the broadcasters of the impartiality requirements during election periods, the Lib Dems do in any case receive greater media coverage in the weeks before polling day. In both 1997 and 2001, between the beginning and the end of the campaigns, the Lib Dems showed a level of uplift in opinion poll support comparable to 2010 of around four to five percentage points. In 2005 it was nearer three, but certainly sufficient to question how much of the increased rating of 2010 was solely the result of the Prime Ministerial debates. Not only that, the assumption that Cameron would have attempted to go it alone if he had achieved only the tiniest of majorities does not take account of his own close witnessing of the traumatic Major years, when a government with a majority even in double figures struggled to establish its political authority.

Nevertheless, the role of the debates – and thus, prospects for taking part in future ones – became central to Tory post-mortems of the party's performance as arguments began to rage on the ConservativeHome website:

*The decision to agree to equal status for the Liberal Democrats was the number one explanation for David Cameron's failure to win a majority. The damaging effect of the election debates was predictable and predicted.*<sup>137</sup>

Though this view crystallised around Michael Ashcroft's well publicised criticism of the decision to agree to the debates, in fact, the former deputy chairman's focus was somewhat misinterpreted – he was actually making a more fundamental and long-term criticism of Conservative strategy:

*The debates were arguably a tactical error which exposed a strategic problem: three weeks before the election the market was still wide open for a party of change. Nick Clegg was only able to appropriate the territory of 'real change' because we did not dominate it ourselves.*<sup>138</sup>

The party's campaign supremo, George Osborne, made it clear afterwards that he had no regrets about agreeing to debates, spelling out a tactical reason which contrasted somewhat with the earlier more altruistic objectives. In a post-election interview, Osborne indicated the concern there had been that Labour might repeat the tactics used successfully against the Tories in 2001 and 2005: 'Without the coverage of the debates and the process we'd have had days of Labour exploiting the voters' fears of us.' Osborne told his

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<sup>136</sup> Peter Kellner: 'Is there Really a Progressive Majority?', YouGov Commentary, 14 May 2010: <http://today.yougov.co.uk/commentaries/peter-kellner/there-really-progressive-majority>.

<sup>137</sup> ConservativeHome General election review, 12 May 2010: <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/generalelectionreview/2010/05/contents.html>.

<sup>138</sup> Ashcroft, *Minority Verdict*.

interviewers he ‘thought the media interest on process protected his party ‘from weeks of heavy Labour pounding over issues like tax credits. Labour strategists, aware of this, were frustrated.’<sup>139</sup> As an aside, then, it is worth just noting that this tactical argument in favour of debates only really applies when being made by a party in opposition: it is unlikely to be deployed again by the Conservatives when they approach the next election as a governing party. Similarly, one more intriguing theory about why the Tories signed up, put forward by ConservativeHome’s Tim Montgomerie, may not have quite the same force in 2015: sourced to one of David Cameron’s ‘closest advisers’ just as the Murdoch empire appeared to be in meltdown, Montgomerie claims ‘the most credible explanation’ was that ‘the Tory high command agreed to the debates – with Sky enjoying equal status to the BBC and ITV – as part of a general desire to keep News International happy’.<sup>140</sup>

But the debate about debates on ConservativeHome was by no means one-sided. From a perspective of a few months on from the election campaign, one former party researcher and speech-writer urged the Conservative leadership not to reject debates next time – but to prepare for them better:

*Any wannabe prime minister worth their salt should relish the opportunity. ... As a nation, we ... should want our candidates to be tested. As a party, we should rise to the challenge. David Cameron is a formidable debater. He doesn't need mollycuddling (sic) and protecting from the demands of democracy. What he needed was to be better prepared. His team screwed up.*<sup>141</sup>

#### 4.4. Will they? Won't they?

In terms of the prospects for next time, then, the verdict on debates from the Conservative Party – if not from David Cameron – is, at best, mixed. Of the three parties, their supporters were – marginally more than Labour – the least enthusiastic about the debates, according to the YouGov surveys. Thus one further variable will be the security with which the Prime Minister commands his party as the election approaches. Conservative tradition adopts a notoriously pragmatic stance regarding the ability of its leader to deliver victory and room for manoeuvre is likely to be dependent on opinion poll rating. At the very least, there will be voices urging Cameron not to allow the debates to be so dominant, either by having fewer of them or – as incumbent Labour would have preferred before 2010 – for them to be more spread out. With a fixed-term Parliament, they may argue that the practicalities of beginning debates some time before the campaign proper may now be less difficult. The broadcasters, however, would be less keen, knowing that real engagement – and large audience numbers – may not be secured until polling day is more imminent. In that respect, however, the Conservatives may find common cause with Labour, who always favoured an earlier start for the debates in 2010.

One potentially severe new difficulty for debates in 2015 seems to have been averted. The fixed Westminster parliament initially appeared to be leading to its next poll coinciding with the 2015 elections for the Scottish

<sup>139</sup> Kavanagh and Cowley, *British General Election*.

<sup>140</sup> Tim Montgomerie: ‘The Cameron–Murdoch Relationship Didn’t Win the Last Election for the Tories: It Helped Lose it’, ConservativeHome, 11 July 2011: <http://conservativehome.blogspot.com/2011/07/the-cameron-murdoch-relationship-didnt-win-the-last-election-for-the-tories-it-helped-lose-it.html>.

<sup>141</sup> Tom Greeves, ‘Don’t Drop the TV Debates’, article for Centre Right on ConservativeHome, 19 Sept. 2010: <http://conservativehome.blogspot.com/2010/09/dont-drop-the-tv-debates.html>.

Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies. This would certainly have complicated the judgements over who takes part in debates: both the SNP and Plaid Cymru would have a much stronger case for some sort of inclusion if there was a single 'super-election campaign'. The shift to a five-year term in Edinburgh and Cardiff, delaying the next elections to 2016, means that this particular element – already tested in the High Court in Edinburgh – is less problematic than it might have been. However, the advent of a majority SNP government in Holyrood, not to mention whatever consequences may emerge from a referendum on independence, add more variants to the equation: each new factor presents a potential extra hurdle for those who hoped the starting point for debates in 2015 would be the 2010 status quo.

## Conclusion

What lessons will the negotiators of would-be 2015 debates draw from 50 years of failure and one arguably spectacularly successful set of debates in 2010? Starting early, unanimity among broadcasters, straightforward simplicity: these are not the key to whether debates will happen or not – but the lack of each can contribute to failure.

On the first: there will clearly be a different sense of direction – an expectation and a sense that something will be sorted at some stage – but it will be no easier to pin down a solid commitment to debates years ahead of the election than it has been in the past. The political parties will not regard sorting out an agreement as any kind of priority until an election is at least on the horizon. They will still want to keep options open. And then they will take stock, each making their own political calculation as to the possible impact on their own electoral prospects and it is that which will calibrate the level of urgency, enthusiasm and commitment applied to the quest for agreement. In the meantime, the broadcasters will have to be content keeping discussion ‘ticking over’ and maintaining ducks in the right row – not letting anyone forget the impact of the debates, reassessing how changing circumstances are likely to influence them in future, but patient in terms of nailing down firm agreement. They should be able to rely on a greater weight of public interest and approval behind the expectation that a second set of debates will take place than was the case first time round.

Regarding the broadcasters’ unanimity: the extent to which the BBC, ITV, and Sky came to find common cause in making the 2010 debates happen has provided a highly successful template for next time. Broadcasting is a fast-moving environment, so no one can be certain that the priorities, relationships, and resources of each will remain unchanged running up to 2015. Of all the variables, however, this is probably the element which carries least uncertainty: collectively, the debates ensured that television was still the primary medium for the election; for each of the broadcasters, the debates brought valuable prestige, positive attention, and appreciative audiences; they will do all they can to ensure a repeat performance in 2015.

Third, how to keep it simple? A balance will need to be struck between attempts at innovation or change to the debates and the introduction of potentially detrimental complications. The YouGov surveys, whilst indicating strong support for debates to be held again, also suggested that many voters would like to see them done differently. For instance, greater variety of format between the debates is favoured by some, on the lines of some of the more recent US debates – the so-called ‘town-hall’ approach – as one way in which the leaders might have more direct interaction with the electorate through the audience. But a key component of the progress made towards debates in 2009 was that, just as the three parties were treated equally, so were the three broadcasters. There was no need for wrangling between them about who would employ which format – and very limited areas for competition in terms of the ability to produce the ‘best’ debate. Other than set design and programme style, plus personality of the moderator, the variations were limited to ‘batting order’ and themes – both of which were settled by the time-honoured method of drawing bits of paper from a beaker. Having a range of formats would certainly be less simple, raising the risk of disagreement – but it would not be impossible to organise, given the level of trust the broadcasters have established between them in this area. There are many other ways of recomplicating the process, however, and those who took

for granted the success of 2010 or who now believe future debates are already a given, are likely to underestimate the ease with which a spanner could still be dropped – deliberately or accidentally – into the works. The UK debates were already seen by some who had a wider outside perspective as being an improvement on what had gone before elsewhere. Alan Schroeder, historian of presidential debates, who had previously been sceptical about the '76 rules', noted immediately afterwards that any guidance the UK had sought from the US experience had proved unnecessary: 'As things turned out, the Brits didn't need our help. The three-debate series that ended last night has turned the tables, offering a range of lessons that American politicians would do well to heed.'<sup>142</sup> One prominent Australian expert felt the UK format was rather less stilted than his own country's more established model: 'The 2010 UK Leaders' Debates saw a more dynamic interpretation of US presidential debates, with far more speaker interaction than we get to see.'<sup>143</sup> It would not be a disaster, then, to repeat the same format if it ensured the debates happened.

What the 2010 debates have almost certainly done is to remove from reluctant participants the political cover of any 'noble' or principled reason for not taking part. That leaves them with a higher risk of having their more base political motives exposed than was the case from 1964 to 2005. The best such parties can hope for in the future is that talks collapse in mutual recriminations in a way which shares out the blame. The potential issues for fuelling such disagreements will not have disappeared: equality or otherwise between the UK parties; impartiality with regard to other political parties; the interests of other broadcasters; the number, timing, and distribution of debates; the format and the themes; the role of the audience and of the moderator; in truth, any one of the so-called '76 rules' hammered out before the 2010 election. All, to a greater or lesser extent, have had some influence on the likelihood of debates over the past 50 years: the more which are put back into play ahead of any settlement of what might occur in 2015, the higher the risk that debates will not happen.

Looking back across the chequered history of attempting to secure election debates in the UK, a number of key factors emerge. First, that setting them up requires a level of trust and confidentiality between the key stakeholders which has to operate in parallel to and separate from their normal relationships of being distanced and competitive. This applies most obviously between the political parties themselves, but also between them and the broadcasters and, to a lesser extent, between the broadcasters. Each has to be able to assume from the start that stated commitments in favour of the outcome are genuine and that the negotiations themselves are immunised against party-political rancour, the proper independence of media commentary, and the sharp competitive instincts of the broadcasters.

Second, it will be important for the broadcasters and other supporters of debates to keep reminding politicians and critics alike of the differential impact they seem to have had on 'marginally attentive citizens'. As Stephen Coleman concluded: 'the 2010 prime ministerial debates reached parts of the electorate that have been hitherto most excluded from our

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<sup>142</sup> Alan Schroeder, 'Lessons for American Politicians from the British TV Debates', Huffington Post, 30 Apr. 2010: [www.huffingtonpost.com/alan-schroeder/lessons-for-american-poli\\_b\\_558519.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alan-schroeder/lessons-for-american-poli_b_558519.html).

<sup>143</sup> Ray D'Cruz, 'Debating the Debates Commission', Election Debates website, 22 Sept. 2010: <http://electiondebates.wordpress.com/2010/09/22/debating-the-debates-commission-the-risk-of-bipartisanship>.

electoral democracy'.<sup>144</sup> Younger voters and those who may barely engage with any other political communication at election time – and probably have none at all outside the campaign period – should remain prominent in any discussion of future debates and their objectives. For the BBC, in particular, this is a specific purpose – 'sustaining citizenship and civil society' – emanating from its most recent Charter renewal, in which it is committed to developing 'effective and engaging ways of covering the political issues that resonate with UK audiences who do not necessarily see Parliament as reflecting and representing their concerns'.<sup>145</sup>

Third, debates are not the be-all and the end-all. 2010 should be the high point of their campaign dominance, with the aim at future elections for debates to remain only a part – albeit a very substantial part – of the wider offering to voters. If they were to become the only form of scrutiny for those who aspire to be in government, then critics would have some justification in complaining that the electorate was not well served. Debates are not a substitute for other forms of scrutiny and engagement, including in-depth interviews, closer interaction with audiences and voters, and the other traditional elements of election campaigning. They add something extra in terms of engagement, but they should not replace all other political communication at election time – there lies a potential temptation for both political parties and broadcasters when cash is tight.

In 2009, the shadow of 50 years without debates loomed large over the 13 negotiators who quietly gathered first at the Royal Institute of British Architects and later at the Mothers' Union. What prospect they could succeed where their predecessors had failed? Before 2015, however, the shadow will be cast from the opposite direction. The weight of expectation that Britain now has election debates will carry with it an assumption of success which risks underestimating the old pitfalls and failing to anticipate new ones.

This report has emphasised the success of the debates in terms of the invigoration of the 2010 election campaign. From a BBC perspective, it makes a strong case for the debates having matched resoundingly both the corporation's public purpose and its editorial ambition for stimulating mainstream audiences through participation in the UK's parliamentary democracy. The report rejects the arguments that the debates damaged or trivialised Britain's politics, or that they contributed in a significant degree towards any long-term or malign transformation of the way Britain's political system operates. Even such evidence as is offered for those cases falls far short of providing a counter-weight to the highly positive outcome the debates generated in engaging the public in such a key electoral event.

It is not the purpose of this report to set out a blueprint for how to make sure debates do happen at the next election. For the author and others that will be part of the day-job again. But it does sound a warning that there can be no assumption that the success of 2010 has automatically established Prime Ministerial debates as a permanent feature of UK elections. Making them happen is a fragile and painstaking business, vulnerable to the storms and vagueries of political evolution, accident, and determined self-interest. Those committed to debates – be they politicians, broadcasters, commentators, or voters – will need to be mindful of all the factors which left the UK trailing in behind almost every other democratic country – and a few

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<sup>144</sup> Stephen Coleman, 'Performance and Rhetoric: The 2010 Prime Ministerial Debates', BBC/David Butler lecture, 7 Feb. 2011.

<sup>145</sup> BBC Trust, Public Purposes remits: Sustaining Citizenship and Civil Society, Dec. 2007: [www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/about/how\\_we\\_govern/purpose\\_remits](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/about/how_we_govern/purpose_remits).

rather less democratic ones – across the world. They will need to be well prepared for addressing new difficulties which will inevitably emerge through changed political circumstances. Perhaps most of all, they will need to beware of complacency: that just because debates have happened and were, by most accounts, highly successful and just because almost everyone, including opponents, is convinced they will happen again, there is no guarantee that they can yet be regarded as here to stay.

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