

Leaders' debates



Three debates down, but have we really learnt anything new?

Jennie Agg
Editor

Thursday marked the last of the televised leaders' debates, but what have they taught us about the men wanting to run Britain? Well, we learnt that David Cameron met a black man once, that Nick Clegg is really quite likeable once you actually know he exists and - courtesy of a Sky News overhead camera - that, yes, Gordon Brown's jokes are as scripted as they sound.

Thursday's third and final debate saw notably slicker performances from Cameron, Brown and Clegg. All parties had seemingly called in every last favour from body-language experts, media trainers and the Institute for Research into Ministerial Hair.

Gordon Brown kept a lid on his more unappealing instincts and even managed to put a canny spin on his encounter with Gillian of Rochdale. In his opening address he told the nation: "There is a lot to this job and, as you saw yesterday, I don't get all of it right. But I do know how to run the economy, in good times and in bad." Although he is still trailing in the polls, Brown's speeches on Thursday were remarkably impassioned. Of course, the night's economic focus allowed him to capitalise on what should really be his specialist subject, but, nonetheless, fighting talk from the Labour leader went some way to dispel the cloud of desperation that has clung to him throughout this election.

Compared to the previous debates, where the trade in insults amounted to sly wisecracks about boys at bath-time and the exact addresses of illegal immigrants, Thursday was a more snappish affair. After criticism from Cameron over his

suggested amnesty for illegal immigrants, Nick Clegg rounded on the Conservative party leader saying: "Let's save time and assume that every time you talk about our policy you are wrong."

Clegg backed up his apparent frustration with Cameron, pouring scorn onto the Tory leader's own immigration policies. The Tory leader refused to be drawn on exact figures for his proposed cap on immigration.

Elsewhere, Cameron accused Brown of having "absolutely nothing positive left to say." Likewise, he did a good job of hinting (in the most obvious way) at Labour hypocrisy with a nod to Sir "Fred the Shred" Goodwin.

Brown went for the anti-Tory jugular, lambasting their commitment to cutting inheritance tax. Cameron came back with his second favourite soundbite (after his notional 'big society'), defending the plans as rewarding those Britons who had "done the right thing."

All in all, there wasn't much that was said on Thursday that we hadn't heard before. And, as Rory Bremner mused afterwards on *The Week*, much like a Rorschach inkblot test, the tendency is to project what you want to see onto these debates. So what should we take away from the last of the debates, if anything? For me, the ties have it. Nick Clegg went for a pre-emptive Lib-Lab orange. Gordon Brown was Labervative purple at first glance, but actually covered in white dots - which when you're trying to look ministerial is akin to sporting a Homer Simpson novelty tie. Probably an attempt to seem unconcerned with such fripperies, but which sadly missed the mark. David Cameron, meanwhile, still clinging to the hope of a small Conservative majority, plumped for a true blue Tory cerulean.

Only time will tell...



James Bennison
21, Maths, 3rd Year (above): I'm not registered to vote, but I wish I was now. Of all them, I preferred Nick Clegg's approach. Gordon Brown and David Cameron bicker amongst themselves, whereas Nick Clegg actually says 'here are my policies'. People always say the Lib Dems aren't even an option, and that it's mathematically impossible and that annoys me.



Marcus Barnett, Holocaust Studies, 1st year (above, left): To be honest none of them said anything of particular substance. They're all saying the same old things. They're all talking about public sector cuts and making us pay for the crisis. I don't really see anything that applies to ordinary people. I'll be voting Labour to keep the Tories out.



Rob Manning
20, Law, 2nd Year (above): David Cameron came out the best. In the first debate he appeared quite nervous but here he really had the substance and the right arguments. Gordon was quite misleading - particularly on child tax credits, which he mentioned regularly. Cameron was very clear, Nick Clegg dodged a couple of questions.



Lucy Clerk, Speech and Language Therapy, 4th year (left): The hype over the Lib Dems and Nick Clegg is a bit too much. When you look a bit closer at his policies, they don't stand up the way they should do. I'm going to vote Conservative because I think Cameron's the only option besides Gordon Brown. I don't think Nick Clegg is the winning vote.

Continued from front page

Conservative party leader David Cameron described this six-year wait as "small print" when he was put on the spot by a Southampton University student. "They aren't going to do it for six years. Six years! I think that's a complete con for people."

"I think it's better to be upfront as I am and say we can't get rid of the tuition fees and the top-up fees because we want good university places."

Labour leader and Prime Minister Gordon Brown last week told "bigoted" Rochdale resident Gillian Duffy: "If you get a degree and you earn twice as much after you get the degree then you've got

to pay something back as a contribution."

Recent graduates are among the many people struggling to find work, despite their education. Clegg described this blow to young people as "unacceptable".

"That's why [we] will concentrate on creating jobs in our first year. Out of the savings I was talking about earlier, we'll invest just over £3bn in a jobs and infrastructure package."

"That package also includes a 90-day promise to young people: if you can't find work, you won't spend more than three months on Jobseeker's Allowance before we find you further training or a paid internship."

Labour candidate for Manchester Withington Lucy

Powell told *Student Direct: Mancunian* last fortnight that a vote for the Lib Dems in her constituency was a vote for the Conservatives nationally. "At the end of the day we're going to end up with either David Cameron or Gordon Brown walking into 10 Downing Street," said Powell.

"It's absurd, isn't it?" Clegg said curtly. "To have Labour in some parts of the country threatening that a vote for us is a vote for David Cameron, and to have the Conservatives in other areas saying exactly the same about Gordon Brown. They can't both be right, so I think it's pretty obvious that both are wrong."

"A vote for the Liberal Democrats is exactly what it says on the tin: a vote for the Liberal

Democrats.

"So don't let anyone tell you it can't be different this time. Vote with your heart and you can make the difference."

Under the UK's first-past-the-post (FPTP) system it is possible for a party to come into power in Westminster even if they do not gain the popular vote if they still win the most seats.

"Our electoral system is against anyone who believes in proper democracy," said Clegg. "There has to be something seriously wrong with a system that can get a party into government with just 22 per cent of people voting for them, which is what happened with Labour in 2005."

Prior to the debates, Clegg claimed that he would not be a

"kingmaker for the British people", meaning that he would not prop up a government not given the proper authority to govern by the public.

However electoral systems based on forms of proportional representation (PR) - such as single transferable vote (STV) which the Lib Dems suggest in their manifesto - have a tendency to produce these so-called kingmakers. Under PR-based forms it can be difficult for a party to achieve a sufficient share of the vote to govern independently. In this case, a coalition would be formed behind closed doors. Therefore it could be these backroom deals, not the ballot box, which define the composition of government.

Clegg dismissed this: "The Conservatives want to convince people a change to the voting system will lead to weak government but what really leads to weak government is when people are expected to recognise a party's mandate even when they have such low levels of support."

David Cameron countered this last week: "I don't want the electoral system to change, I think it would be a big, big mistake for this country." In a comment piece in the *Telegraph* earlier this year, the opposition leader said: "The truth is that people don't want a new voting system. They want a new politics."

Additional reporting by George Robinson.