



The Leaders debate: a bore draw?

Yesterday evening Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn took part in the first live debate of this UK General Election campaign. In a contest that generated more heat than light, neither candidate for Prime Minister landed a knock-out blow. A snap poll by YouGov conducted minutes after the debate found close to a dead heat, with Mr Johnson the very narrow winner by 51% to 49%.

Jeremy Corbyn started and ended the debate strongly, setting out his argument for why people should vote Labour in a clear and concise manner, whilst looking straight down the camera to the audience at home. Mr Johnson was more hesitant, reading from notes during both the opening and closing statements.

But as the debate got underway with Brexit the topic of the first half, Boris Johnson was on surer ground with a clear position, arguing that he had a deal ready to go, while Jeremy Corbyn repeatedly ducked questions about whether he would back Remain or Leave in Labour's proposed referendum.

Mr Corbyn tried to move Brexit on to the future relationship, claiming that the government had held secret meetings about opening up the NHS to American firms. He produced government papers, obtained under Freedom of Information, to back up his claims, the contents of which were sensitive and redacted. Mr Johnson dismissed Labour claims as "completely untrue".

Asked by the moderator Julie Etchingham whether the Union or Brexit was more important, Boris Johnson said keeping the nations of the U.K. together was more important than securing Brexit, while Jeremy Corbyn claimed that Labour would not enter into a pact with the SNP.

The focus of the second half of the debate was on domestic policy and the NHS dominated, but the Prime Minister continually tried to bring the debate back to Brexit. That clearly showed message discipline, but perhaps by the end of the debate was overplayed.

The party leaders were asked questions about trust, their personal character and the current state of political debate in Britain. Mr Corbyn gave an answer to questions about anti-Semitism in today's Labour Party that would be greeted with derision by those who have experienced it first-hand, while Mr Johnson failed to answer the question directly and instead tried to shift the answer onto Brexit. Invited by the moderator to shake hands at the end of

this segment, it was the Prime Minister who confidently walked across the stage to shake Mr Corbyn's hand.

The party leaders were asked about Prince Andrew, whose relationship with the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein has dominated news headlines in the UK in recent days. Mr Corbyn began by focussing on Mr Epstein's victims and conceded that the monarchy "needs some improvement". The prime minister looked uncomfortable with the question and although he too referenced the victims of these crimes, his conventional answer: "the institution of the monarchy is beyond reproach" did not hit the right note, given the unfolding scandal.

In truth, neither leader excelled in the debate and both passed up opportunities to make quick interventions, shift the tone of the debate or use humour. Ms. Etchingham at times had to stop Boris Johnson for speaking too long and when the audience laughed, it was at, rather than with, Mr Corbyn and Mr Johnson. This will concern both parties' strategists.

After the debate, Conservative ministers flooded the "spin room", arguing that Corbyn had "nine times avoided the central question on Brexit". However, Conservative Party Chairman James Cleverley was forced onto the defensive over the rebrand one of the Conservative twitter accounts as "factcheckUK", a decision that earned the party a sharp rebuke from Twitter.

It is always a risk for a Prime Minister whose party is ahead in the polls to debate the Leader of the Opposition and Boris Johnson will be pleased to have come out of this evening's debate relatively unscathed. By contrast, with Labour behind by 10 points, Jeremy Corbyn will have hoped to use this evening's debate to close that gap. He has demonstrated he can go toe-to-toe in a debate with Mr Johnson, but it is unclear that it has made any difference yet to the fundamentals of this campaign.

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For further advice and support or if you have any questions, please contact Razi Rahman, Partner and Head of Political at Maitland/AMO, on rrahman@maitland.co.uk