

If the debates do not go ahead, it will be the fault of self-interest on the part of the main parties and the broadcasters

By Democratic Audit UK

*Whether there will be debates this year in advance of the 2015 General Election is open to question, with partisan and corporate self-interest threatening to overwhelm the process by which inclusion in the debate is governed. **Nicholas Allen** argues that this brinkmanship threatens the debates taking place not only in a satisfactory manner, but going ahead at all.*



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The negotiations between the broadcasters and the political parties to stage televised leaders' debates in 2015 have entered a new stage of brinkmanship. The current round of bluff and counter bluff was triggered in early January by [Ofcom's interim decision](#) not to include the Green Party (including the Scottish Green Party) in its list of Britain-wide major political parties. This decision greatly weakened the party's claim to be included in at least one of the proposed debates.

In response, David Cameron upped the stakes by [publicly refusing to participate](#) unless the Green leader Natalie Bennett was allowed to do so as well. And in response to Cameron, Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage have now joined forces and [called for the debates to take place anyway](#) and for an 'empty podium' in Cameron's place if he chooses not to participate. Inevitably, the political parties claim to be acting in the public interest, so too the broadcasters. Equally inevitably, all the interested parties are acting in their own interests.

The basis for negotiations was established last October, when the BBC, Channel 4, ITV and Sky News invited the Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and UKIP leaders to participate in [a series of three televised debates](#). Whereas the 2010 debates had followed the simple formula of the three main party leaders all taking part in three debates, the broadcasters now proposed a new format.

One debate would involve just Cameron and Miliband, another would involve Cameron, Miliband and Clegg, and a third debate would involve Cameron, Miliband, Clegg and Farage. Each debate would take place fortnightly rather than weekly. Moreover, whereas the 2010 debates had been themed around domestic, foreign and economic affairs respectively, each debate in 2015 could potentially cover any subject area.

The proposals had a number of obvious attractions. For a start, there was a clear rationale to each debate. The two-way contest would be a straight debate between potential prime ministers. The three-way contest would provide an opportunity to debate the Coalition Government's record and for Cameron and Clegg to make clear where they had disagreed. The four-way contest would help reflect the increasingly multi-party nature of British politics.

Furthermore, spreading out the debates over the campaign could create more space for other campaign activities. Some important details were missing in the proposals, however, not least how the broadcasters intended to coordinate editorial decisions. Since [the content of debates](#) is largely determined by the questions asked, it would clearly be desirable for the selection of questions to be joined-up in a way that exposes voters to the full range of issues.

Most of the discussions have taken place behind closed doors. From an outsider's perspective, it is unclear whether the parties' decisions to 'go public' reflect a breakdown in negotiations or political point-scoring in the wake of Ofcom's ruling. It is clear, however, that the stakes are high. The broadcasters want to repeat the success of the 2010 debates; they were, after all, good television.

The parties want a format that works to their advantage. Cameron almost certainly wants the Greens to be involved to distract attention from UKIP and to split the Labour and the Liberal Democrat vote shares. For the same reasons, Miliband, Clegg and Farage would probably prefer for Bennett not to be included. Needless to say, UKIP and potentially the Greens are keen to enjoy the publicity that comes with taking part.

The current posturing by Messrs Cameron, Miliband, Clegg and Farage almost certainly has two purposes: to influence the negotiations to their advantage; and to manage public expectations should negotiations fail. Cameron's threat not to take part unless the Greens are included is almost certainly based on the assumption that the debates could not proceed without him.

They would be hugely devalued as television events; and, as a [recent report](#) by the House of Lords Communications Committee notes, it is also unclear whether broadcasters could meet their legal and regulatory obligations by screening debates without him. Of course, one or more broadcasters [may be tempted to carry on](#) regardless. Cameron's threat is also probably underpinned by the hope that the argument of 'fairness' to the Greens will provide him with sufficient cover if the negotiations fail or if debates take place without him.

Miliband, Clegg and Farage are probably unsure whether debates can go ahead without Cameron, though they may have persuaded themselves that they can. At any rate, the Labour, Liberal Democrat and UKIP leaders have much to gain by emphasising their own willingness to take part, and by simultaneously portraying Cameron as 'running scared' and essentially being anti-democratic. By encouraging the broadcasters to press ahead with the debates, they may also be able to increase further the pressure on Cameron. He may relent and take part, a victory in itself. And if he does not, or if the debates do not happen, he will be the prime minister who ducked the challenge.

The fate of the debates will now depend on who blinks first. Will the broadcasters invite the Greens? Will Cameron remove his condition of their inclusion? Will any of the broadcasters risk organising debates without Cameron? And if a debate goes ahead without Cameron, will the Conservatives take legal action to prevent them being broadcast?

It is difficult to make predictions about how this will play out on the basis of what happened last time. Negotiations in 2010 were kept on track by a strong commitment among all those involved to see the debates happen. Negotiations in 2015 are taking place in a very different set of circumstances. On the one hand, there is a much stronger expectation that debates will take place. On the other hand, the volatile political landscape creates uncertainty for broadcasters and party strategists alike. It is less clear who should be included from the point of view of fairness, if not the regulatory framework; it is also unclear what effect, if any, including UKIP or any other party will have on the outcome of the election. Crucially, the expectations and uncertainty exacerbate the risks for the parties, whether in terms of signing up to potentially damaging formats or choosing not to take part at all.

Whatever the public posturing, any agreement to proceed with the debates will require careful and lengthy

negotiations, behind closed doors, between the broadcasters and parties. This will continue to be the case until such time as televised leaders' debates become fully normalised in British elections. Once debates are an entrenched feature of election campaigns, it may be worth revisiting the question of whether some independent body should be established to organise or sponsor them. No matter how sincerely and reasonably parties and broadcasters behave in private, the way in which debates are negotiated in Britain will continue to be a bone of contention for excluded parties.

They will also be a potential source of public disquiet. The mainstream parties are widely distrusted, and the current posturing will only serve to confirm many voters' beliefs. Moreover, while the broadcasters see themselves as honest brokers, they have their own interests at heart, and their interactions with the parties will inevitably fuel suspicions. According to an ICM poll published in December, nearly [fourth-fifths of respondents](#) wanted the Greens to participate in the multi-party debate.

Few voters will be understanding if the debates take place without the Greens. Even fewer will be understanding if they take place without Cameron, or if they do not take place at all.

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