

Tonight's TV Debate: The Beginning Of The End

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It's like a soap synopsis, but Krishnan Guru-Murthy's Tweet was right about the tactics for tonight's leadership debate:

"none needs to win tonight. but cameron needs to damage clegg. brown needs to damage cameron. clegg needs to stay in the game"

So how will it shape up compared to the previous two?

Even though I was following it online while stranded in Spain, I could tell that Clegg had won massively in the first debate. It was a game changer. If you could have a three-way football match with three halves it put Clegg 5-3-1 up on Cameron and Brown.

The second debate didn't shift opinion further but it stemmed the Labour slide and solidified the Clegg surge, even though Cameron 'won' the actual debate in my book. I think it left the score at two-thirds-time at Clegg 7 – Cameron 8 – Brown 4.

So tonight Brown can't afford to do an [Inter Milan](#) and hope to cling on. He is in Barca's shoes. He has to score early and often. The economy is very much his home ground but unfortunately he's not a political Messi. [Do stop me if this metaphor is getting over-extended ;)]

However, I think that after the nightmare of [Bigotgate](#), anything like an honest and honourable performance that concentrates on the big economic themes could win him credit. [I have argued](#) that the Duffy incident was a significant event that will have real impact on the campaign, but I don't think there's an appetite amongst the public to prolong the agony. I pray for his sake that his advisors have not given him any pre-scripted jokes and have warned him to stop reading out interminable lists.

But Cameron also needs a bit more momentum for the final stretch if he is to avoid a hung parliament. He kept referring to himself as 'Prime Minister' last week, this time he needs to act like one. Personally, I would advise him to give up on the amorphous Big Society narrative and talk about the tough, realistic choices that only a Tory can make. More Super Surgeon than Dr Feelgood.

So if I was Nick Clegg I would be very nervous – though he doesn't seem to suffer from that condition. He is up against two desperate men. One has tasted the pinnacle of power, while the other is a handful of seats away from the key to Number 10. The person in their way is the Lib Dem leader. They won't make the mistake of picking on Clegg, but he may suffer from the fact that he can't realistically claim to be a potential PM.

Of course the Change meme works but I can't see how the public can view Lib Dem economic policy as particularly different to the others. Ultimately, I think Clegg's task tonight is to give a convincing audition as the man who will make the Tories acceptable as a (coalition) Government.

The stakes are high. The evidence is that the TV debates have shaped the rhythm and agenda of the campaign and dictated the momentum. But there will still be another (short) week to go. In that sense, tonight's event in Birmingham is not final, just the beginning of the end.

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