

# Business (not) as normal after Leaders Debate II

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2010-4-23

This was the debate I was expecting first time around:

1. Cameron focussing smoothly on Tory policies to target key voters groups – acting as a PM
2. Brown talking realistically about his experience of power and dismissing his rival
3. Clegg popping up to plague both their houses



The factor, of course, that we had all under-played is that the Lib Dem leader was again both literally and politically, at the centre stage.

In terms of performance all three did well enough to boost their own supporters. The difference is that Clegg now has a lot more of those than he did three weeks ago.

So this TV debate has lived up to its [billing that I gave it yesterday](#) as the most important media moment in British politics for 25 years. Even though far fewer people watched it. Even though it was far less decisive. The fact that Clegg is still in the same position and holding on which means that we are still on course for a game-changing hung parliament.

Brown and Cameron turned on Clegg more (especially Brown – Cameron leaves it to his mates in the newspapers) but that simply confirmed this powerful status. Clegg may not be the primus inter pares in terms of candidates, but he is now definitely one of the Alpha Males.

In terms of public reaction, they all did quite well without doing any serious damage or making much headway.

As [Iain Martin writes in the WSJ](#), Cameron still hasn't got a convincing personal narrative:

*Mr. Cameron was presented with various opportunities to look the country in the eye and say why he really wanted to be Britain's Prime Minister. But he seemed diffident and unwilling to be as direct as a candidate needs to be when the stakes are so high.*

Gordon Brown was much more pro-active but as the [Mirror's Tony Parsons](#) points out, he is just not a great TV performer:

*Brown stumbled over his words, desperately applying the brakes*

He was often glancing down at [what we now know was a carefully prepared script](#), including the jokes. Labour now has a real problem in how they respond. As [James Crabtree](#) and [Anthony Painter](#) acknowledge, the game may be up for the Brown campaign.

For Clegg the novel challenge was to respond to attacks in his newfound position as political match-maker. And he appeared to deal competently with charges such as his alleged lack of 'patriotism' according to [the Guardian](#):

*"Clegg tried to project himself as a modern, reasoned patriot, saying he was proud of the values that*

The key factor now is the Bicycle Syndrome. If you get a surge in politics you have to find ways of keeping the momentum going. Unless you keep going forward you fall off. Clegg certainly did enough last night to stay in the saddle, but where does his campaign go now? How does it seal the deal with all those swing voters who have suddenly discovered the joys of three party politics? Roll on Debate 3.

Election campaigns used to have a daily rhythm measured out by the morning press conferences. These have become largely irrelevant in setting the agenda. We now have a weekly agenda dominated by the build-up to and reaction from the TV debates. Performance and persona over 90 minutes set-pieces are now the key mediations of political communications for Election 2010.

A few additional points.

Well done to Adam Boulton, but if these debates are to continue to hold our attention then they must be more interactive on screen. The best bit of last night was the quality of the questions and the questioners.

The post-performance polling is by its nature very provisional but I am still unsure of the methodologies. The media needs to be much clearer of their unrepresentative nature.

Oh, and if you really insist on talking about the actual content instead of the media and presentation, then [go to this blog for policy reaction](#). I was struck by the generally warm tone towards Europe and the complete absence of any discussion of the world beyond that, let alone of International Development.

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