

# How Clegg Powered His Way Into A Menage A Trois

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It's My Show

In this guest blog, my colleague [Dr Damian Tambini](#) gives his analysis of how Nick Clegg achieved that breakthrough for the Lib Dems thanks to last week's TV debates. A mixture of body language and power games did the trick, but what does it mean for our ability to handle coalition politics?

Nick Clegg made a sudden and quite unexpected breakthrough in the first TV debate last week and he did so through sheer hutzpah on the basis of his unrivalled intellect, personal charisma and likeable personality. This startling individual performance has sparked a reaction that may finally allow the third party of British politics to 'Break the Mould' and usher in a new age of coalition politics.

A nice story, but unfortunately it is backwards. In the acres of commentary following the first debate, we have missed the fundamental point: it was the possibility of coalition politics that was the crucial factor shaping the first leaders' debate and the reaction that followed.

The reshaping of British politics that could yet emerge from this election will be due, largely, to coincidence, and in particular to the fact that the first TV debate took place at the precise moment when the two other party leaders could no longer ignore the possibility that they might quite quickly have to become very good friends with Mr Clegg.

In the UK, in contrast to most other European countries where they are the norm, we are naïve and inexperienced about coalition politics. And so are the party leaders. But they are aware that there is a very real possibility that after the election the government will be formed in smoky rooms where policy commitments and key ministerial posts are traded for political support.

Will the Labour Party go all the way – and support proportional representation – in order to secure the affections of the Lib Dems? If they, or the Conservatives, secure a majority we will never know, but they may have to, and they may have to go into a genuine and lasting partnership with them in any case.

So the leaders of the two main parties are becoming more aware of the possibility of a horse-trading scenario, and this affects their response to Clegg. This explains why we all thought Clegg made such a good fist of the first debate.

Accustomed as we are to the Punch and Judy ritual of two parties biting chunks out of one another, it was the uneasy respect that Cameron and Brown afforded to their would-be coalition partner – together with their natural reticence about attack politics in the new medium, that gave us the perception of Clegg's 'greatness'.

Where we expected Clegg to be the 'cheeky little brother' popping up to try to get his word in between the clash of the Titans, what we saw, and what was etched into the very staging of the ritual was a leader on a par with them, and one who was confident in the power of his position.

The television debate, for all its rather macho maleness was fundamentally a *ménage a trois* in which the leaders of the two larger parties both desperately wanted to get into bed with Clegg to form a more satisfying and stable *ménage a deux*.

Brown and Cameron's body language, and their reluctance to interrupt or contradict the Lib-Dem leader fed our

perception that he 'won' the debate. For decades, sociologists have been studying 'turn-taking' in conversation.



Not his show

They find that people are all much less likely to interrupt people with power. As the potential kingmaker for both party leaders Clegg holds the power, and he knows it. Buoyed by the unfamiliar deference he was enjoying, this fed Clegg's confidence.

During the debate, Clegg's answers tended to be longer than those of his rivals, and during the parts of the debate when it was permitted, Cameron and Brown were much more likely to interrupt and contradict one another than they were to interrupt Clegg.

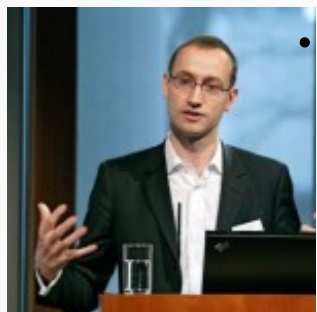
Aside from some minor skirmishes on immigration and on expenses, Cameron didn't lay a glove on Clegg, and Brown if anything was courting Clegg's favour even more cloyingly, particularly during the conversation on Alternative Vote and electoral reform.

Will this *ménage* effect ripple through the next two debates? Possibly. But Clegg will not be given quite such an easy ride since he has become the main threat in the market for votes and this will be at the top of the strategic thinking of the other parties.

The issues to be discussed in debate 2 –foreign and European policy – do place him in more direct opposition to his rivals. But it may be too late for Cameron and Brown to reverse this trend, and they will in any case have to avoid bullying him. If they criticise his policies too much, their proposal to form a coalition government with him will look unconvincing.

The real victory of the Lib Dems was not to do with policy, nor was it Clegg's personality that clinched it. The victory was to get on the debate in the first place. After a decade in which we have been transfixed by the internet, we may have lost our respect for the power of TV to shape the world we live in. But polls have confirmed that the TV debates last week preceded one of the most rapid shifts in electoral polls in our history, and they did it because they enacted the micro politics of a very public, and very unstable, *ménage a trois*.

This article by [Dr Damian Tambini, Media and Communications Department, LSE](#)



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