



DEBATE PACK

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E-petition 228572: Make TV election debates happen - establish an Independent Debates Commission

By Neil Johnston

A debate will be held in Westminster Hall on Monday 7 January at 4.30pm on [e-petition 228572](#) relating to an independent commission on televised election debates. [Steve Double](#) will lead the debate. The debate will be on the motion that:

“That this House has considered e-petition 228572 relating to an independent commission on televised election debates.”

The petition calls for the creation of an independent commission to organise compulsory televised leaders’ debates during UK general election campaigns.

The petition is backed by a [Sky News campaign](#) that has cross-party support, including Jeremy Corbyn, Caroline Lucas, Sir Vince Cable, Amber Rudd, Peter Bone and all MPs from the SNP.

The Government’s response to the petition makes it clear it does agree, saying “The Government has no plans to change electoral law to make televised elections debates mandatory.”

There is more information on the background and history of televised leaders’ debates in the UK in the Library briefing, [Televised debates between party leaders](#). The information in this pack is taken from that paper.

The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

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1. Background

Televised election debates between party leaders took place during the 2010, 2015 and 2017 Parliamentary general elections campaigns.

There is nothing in electoral law that requires televised election debates between party leaders. If they take place they are a matter for the broadcasters and political parties.

Before 2010 the UK was considered unusual in developed democracies in not holding televised debates between party leaders during general election campaigns. Contrasts were often made with practices in the United States, where leader debates are well established.

On various occasions the principle of televised debates was rejected. At one time or another all three major parties had favoured a debate but agreement could not be reached.

Harold Wilson proposed a televised debate with Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home in the run up to the 1964 election. This was an offer the Douglas-Home refused. In 1970, Wilson, then Prime Minister, refused an offer of a debate with Edward Heath and reportedly Margaret Thatcher was “lukewarm” to the idea of a televised debate with James Callaghan in the late 1970s.

In public the reason cited was constitutional: presidential style debates were not appropriate in a Parliamentary democracy. In practice, political self-interest also played a role. Writing for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Ric Bailey (Chief Adviser, Politics at BBC Editorial Policy) wrote:

Though, in public, the reluctant party leaders cited largely constitutional reasons – in particular, that debates are not appropriate for a non-presidential parliamentary system of government – their more candid considerations focused squarely on political self-interest. Either incumbency or a substantial opinion poll lead – or both – always meant agreeing to debates presented too high a risk for one or other of the parties.¹

It was not until the 1997 election that there was a real prospect of a debate, when it appeared that the Prime Minister, John Major, was interested in an encounter with the Leader of the Opposition, Tony Blair. However, discussions between the broadcasters and parties collapsed without an agreement.

In 2010, broadcasters and the three main parties reached agreement to hold three head-to-head televised debates between the three main party leaders, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg.

Although there were complaints that the debates dominated the campaign and overshadowed local campaigning, there was a perception that they were useful and an expectation that they might become a permanent feature of the election process.

2. 2015 debates

In 2015 the surge in support for smaller parties between the 2010 and 2015 General Elections and how that was accommodated in the leaders' debates complicated the negotiations between the parties and broadcasters.

The DUP secured an Opposition day debate on general election television debates [on 11 March 2015](#). The DUP were unhappy at being excluded from the debates when the broadcasters had invited other parties to participate. The DUP had appealed to the BBC Trust, but the appeal was rejected. The Trust considered that the different treatment of parties in Northern Ireland, which do not contest seats against the main parties in Great Britain was justified:

The Panel was satisfied that the difference in treatment between the Northern Ireland parties and the SNP and Plaid Cymru was based on the different treatment of Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK under the Election Guidelines, and as such, was a reasonable editorial decision for the BBC Executive to have made, and not one in which the BBC Trust should interfere. ²

Opening the debate, Nigel Dodds made clear the position of the DUP. They did not want to prevent debates between the three main parties, but they were dissatisfied that Northern Ireland parties were being treated differently when considering the inclusion of the Greens, SNP and Plaid Cymru.

3. Calls for an independent commission

During the 2015 Opposition day debate the DUP repeated its proposal that an independent body should arrange general election debates between party leaders.

A matter of such importance—putting the electoral choices of the British people directly in front of them—should be raised above the level of partisan squabbling or media meddling. Even at this late hour, a Speaker's conference would start to take us where we need to go, towards the establishment of an independent commission to superintend broadcast election debates. Of course the public want to hear from us, but they must hear from us fairly, without bias and without the blatant incompetence that we have seen here before getting in the way.

Throughout the world, broadcasters work with independent commissions arranging political debates of this kind, and the end result is that in other countries, those debates happen. Here, it

² [Complaints and Appeals Board – Proposed BBC UK Leaders' Debate Appeal from the Democratic Unionist Party, 4 March 2015](#)

seems that the broadcasters know best. They know how to organise the debates, and they go ahead and try to do so on their terms. What has been the end result here? Chaos and confusion—and, eight weeks before the general election, no one has any idea what is happening about any of these debates.³

Stephen Twigg, speaking for the Opposition, said he did not see any reason “for treating Northern Ireland any differently from Scotland or Wales” but that the Opposition believed that it was “for the broadcasters, not the politicians, to determine the nature of the debates. Even at this late stage, we hope that agreement can be reached.”⁴ He also welcomed putting leaders debates on a more formal footing:

We have said that a Labour Government would put the requirement to stage a fair and impartial leaders debate on a statutory footing...it would simply introduce a system that would work along similar lines to the current party political broadcasts, with the Broadcasters’ Liaison Group having the power to come up with proposals for the debates.

[...]

We suggest a deadline of 2017, midway through the next Parliament, for the proposed changes to be put in place. That would give everyone plenty of time to plan for the debates before the subsequent general election. This would be an important constitutional change, introducing a mechanism for the increased accountability of the Prime Minister and other party leaders.⁵

The then Minister for the Constitution, Sam Gyimah, responded that if an independent body oversaw the televised leaders’ debates then a number of questions would have to be answered:

How would it be established and funded? Which debates would it produce? Whom would it invite, and how would it stand up to challenge? How would it succeed in convening the parties, and how would it secure the distribution of the debates among broadcasters? It is an interesting suggestion, but it is obviously not a matter for the Government. Those are some of the questions that rightly need to be answered.⁶

In 2014 the Lords Select Committee on Communications conducted an inquiry into televised election debates. The report said that “broadly speaking, our witnesses were of the view that the 2010 debates could be considered a success.” It went on to state that there was “strong evidence that the majority of the public would like broadcast general election debates to take place” again.⁷

It also considered alternative arrangements, including the establishment of a body, independent of the broadcasters or parties, to oversee or regulate televised leaders’ debates. It did not receive much evidence on what alternative models might entail or how they might work.

³ [HC Deb 11 March 2015, c310](#)

⁴ [HC Deb 11 March 2015 c318](#)

⁵ [HC Deb 11 March 2015 c319](#)

⁶ [HC Deb 11 March 2015 c334](#)

⁷ Lords Select Committee on Communications, *Broadcast general election debates*, HL 171 2013-14, 13 May 2014, p12-16

It concluded that there were “no good arguments for the introduction of such a body.”⁸ It noted that broadcasters were already under regulatory requirements to give due impartiality, particularly at election times.

Under the current arrangements, the important point we make is that there exist a whole series of legal and regulatory safeguards and rules to ensure that all political parties are given due weight by the broadcasters during an election period. This applies across the whole patchwork of coverage relating to the election, of which the debates are just a part.

Suggestions have been made for the establishment of an independent body to oversee the organisation and arrangement of debates. We see no need for that but we do think that the broadcasters could collectively do more to inform voters and encourage the public to be interested in the issues and the process. We already know that 87% of 18-24 year olds – traditionally the demographic most likely to experience voter apathy – said that the debates led to them discussing the election and relevant issues with their peers.⁹

Writing after the 2015 General Election, Charlie Beckett, Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the LSE, notes that while most people accept televised debates are likely to remain a feature of election campaigns there are doubts about the desirability of a formal commission or framework to make them statutory:

All the broadcasters and political parties largely accept that after 2015 something similar now has a place in future campaigns. However, almost everyone rules out any kind of formal regulatory or legislative framework as unrealistic and undesirable. Now we have had two elections with debates makes it less likely (but by no means impossible) to imagine one without any set-piece encounters. The fact that broadcasters were flexible in 2015 makes it harder for parties to refuse to accept adjusted arrangements on any kind of absolute principle.

...

While a formal independent structure to organise debates sounds attractive, it raises questions about who would have the final say and how adaptable it would be if the political landscape continues to evolve. A debate commission sounds like a practical step but the parties will not agree to one unless it gives them more power.¹⁰

⁸ Lords Select Committee on Communications, *Broadcast general election debates*, HL 171 2013-14, 13 May 2014

⁹ [Lords Constitution Committee press release](#), 13 May 2014

¹⁰ Charlie Beckett, *The British General Election of 2015* edited by Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, 2015, p298-9

4. Parliamentary material

4.1 Debate

[General Election Television Debates](#)

Opposition Day Debate

HC Deb 11 Mar 2015 cc302-335

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): That this House recognises the potential value of broadcast general election debates between party leaders; notes however that neither the broadcasters nor politicians can escape the charge of self-interest in their organisation, and that they should best be left to an independent body to arrange; further notes that the broadcast debate formats proposed for 2015 have been inconsistently and incompetently formulated so far; further notes that there exists a substantial danger as a result that these debates will now not happen; and believes that the point of any debates which do happen must be to benefit those who watch them, not those who appear in them or broadcast them.

4.2 Question

[Prime Minister's Questions](#)

HC Deb 19 Apr 2017 c672

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I join the Prime Minister in the expressions of condolence that she led earlier.

This election can change the direction of our country, from the consequences of a potential hard Brexit outside the single market to the future of our NHS and social care, our schools and our environment. The British public deserve to hear the party leaders set out their plans and debate them publicly, but the Prime Minister has refused to take part in televised leaders debates. Back in 1992, when she and I were both candidates, we debated publicly, forcefully and amicably. Indeed, she called out the then incumbent for not showing up for some of those debates. Why will she not debate those issues publicly now? What is she scared of?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I will be debating these issues publicly across the country, as will every single member of the Conservative team. We will be taking out there the proud record of a Conservative Government, but, more than that, we will be taking our plans for the future of this country, for making Brexit a success and delivering a stronger Britain. He talks about the possibility of changing the future of this country. What do we know that the leader of the Labour party, the leader of the Liberal Democrats and the leader of the Scottish nationalists have in common? Corbyn, Farron and Sturgeon want to unite together to divide our country, and we will not let them do it.

4.3 Select Committee

House of Lords Communications Committee

[Inquiry into broadcast General Election debates](#)

The Committee detailed the legal and regulatory framework around broadcasting in their Report published in May 2014. The Committee also proposed a number of reforms to the debates under the continuing editorial stewardship of the broadcasters.

Publications:

- [Report: Broadcast general election debates \(HTML\)](#), HL 171 2013-14
- [Report: Broadcast general election debates \(PDF\)](#), HL 171 2013-14
- [Evidence: Broadcast general election debates \(PDF 1.41 MB\)](#),
6 March 2014

Broadcasters respond to Lords report on general election debates

The BBC, Channel 4, ITV and Sky News have responded to the Lords Select Committee on Communications' Report into Broadcast general election debates:

- [Response from the BBC \(PDF 249 KB\)](#)
- [Response from Channel 4 \(PDF 188 KB\)](#)
- [Response from ITV \(PDF 156 KB\)](#)
- [Response from Sky News \(PDF 61 KB\)](#)

4.4 Bill

[General Election \(Leaders' Debate\) Bill 2017-19](#)

Bill 86 2017-19

Private Members' bill introduced under the ordinary presentation procedure and unlikely to make progress due to the limited time available for private Members' bills. Presented by Peter Bone MP in the House of Commons on 05 Sep 2017.

5. International commissions for pre-election televised debates

5.1 Canadian House of Commons

[The Leaders' Debates Commission](#)

Government of Canada

On October 30, 2018, the Government of Canada announced that it will establish an independent commission to organize leaders' debates.

Mandate

The core of the mandate of the Debates Commissioner is to organize two leaders' debates for the 2019 federal general election—one in each official language. Other elements of the Commissioner's mandate include:

- selecting and establishing a seven-member Advisory Board to the Commissioner;
- entering into contract for the production of the debates;
- providing, free of charge, the feed for the debates it organizes;
- engaging political parties to negotiate terms, and the media to ensure broad distribution;
- engaging with Canadians to raise awareness about debates;
- being the spokesperson of the Commission; and
- following the 2019 general election and no later than March 31, 2020, providing a report to Parliament outlining findings, lessons learned, and recommendations to inform the potential creation in statute of a "built to last" Debates Commission.

In the interest of time, and as a starting point for the upcoming 2019 debates, the Government has established clear criteria for participation by political party leaders. In 2019, debates would include leaders of political parties that meet two of the following three criteria:

1. At the time the general election in question is called, the party is represented in the House of Commons by a Member of Parliament who was elected as a member of that party;
2. The Debates Commissioner considers that the party intends to endorse candidates in at least 90% of electoral districts in the general election in question; and
3. The party's candidates for the most recent general election received at that election at least four percent of the number of valid votes cast or, based on the recent political context, public opinion polls and previous general election results, the Debates Commissioner considers that candidates endorsed by the party have a legitimate chance to be elected in the general election in question;

These participation criteria reflect the broad parameters already used by the broadcasting consortium for past elections. They are in keeping feedback from the consultation process. The Commissioner will be

mandated to finalize and apply the use of these participation criteria for 2019, and will provide recommendations for future debates participation criteria in the Commission's follow-up report.

Establish an independent commission to organize leaders' debates

CTV News, Rachel Aiello

30 October 2018

The federal government is appointing former Governor General David Johnston to be Canada's first-ever independent commissioner of televised leaders' debates during federal elections, moving to take political arm wrestling out of the equation.

Institute for Research on Public Policy

Creating an Independent Commission for Federal Leaders' Debates: Round Table Report

1 April 2018

Canada's Minister of Democratic Institutions was mandated by the Prime Minister to create an independent commission to organize political party leaders' debates in federal election campaigns. As part of the consultation exercise launched by the Minister, the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) facilitated five round tables.

5.2 Commission on Presidential debates (USA)

Commission on Presidential Debates

The Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) was established in 1987 to ensure that general election debates between or among the leading candidates for the offices of President and Vice President of the United States are a permanent part of the electoral process. CPD's primary purpose is to sponsor and produce the quadrennial general election debates and to undertake research and educational activities relating to the debates.

International debates

The Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) is often approached by groups in other countries seeking to establish their own debates. For many years, the CPD has teamed with the [National Democratic Institute for International Affairs \(NDI\)](#) to provide advice and technical assistance on all aspects of debates, using meetings in Washington, D.C., video conference calls, or small teams of experts who travel on-site to help develop plans for sponsoring and producing debates. For more information, please contact the CPD at (202)872-1020 or visit www.debatesinternational.org.

6. Press Articles

[Brexit: ITV scraps plans for TV debate between leaders](#)

BBC News

6 Dec 2018

The channel said it had invited both parties to appear on the programme two days ahead of the meaningful vote on Mrs May's withdrawal agreement. But an ITV spokeswoman has now said it will "not go ahead".

[Up to parties to make TV election debates happen, government says](#)

Sky News, Jon Craig

23 October 2018

As support builds for Sky News' campaign, the Cabinet Office has said the proposals are something to be considered in due course closer to any general election in 2022.

[Election debates commission needed, says Sky News](#)

The Guardian, Patrick Greenfield and Jim Waterson

17 September 2018

An independent body should be set up to run television general election debates, Sky News has urged, amid fears that broadcasters could be cut out of the process entirely in the event of a snap post-Brexit vote.

[Sky News launches campaign to make leaders' TV debate a permanent election fixture](#)

Sky News

17 December 2018

Sir Nick Clegg and Amber Rudd are backing Sky's campaign after party leaders avoided head-to-head TV debates in 2015 and 2017.

[BBC debate: Rivals attack Theresa May over absence](#)

BBC News

1 June 2017

Theresa May's political rivals lined up to criticise her for not taking part in a seven-way general election debate.

[DUP in TV debate independent body call](#)

BBC News

11 March 2015

The DUP have been using parliamentary time in Westminster to call for an independent body to be put in charge of television election debates.

7. Further reading

Bodleian Library blog, [Televised debates in history](#), April 2010

Ric Bailey, [Squeezing Out the Oxygen – or Reviving Democracy? History and Future of TV Election Debates in the UK](#), February 2012

Lords Select Committee on Communications, [Broadcast general election debates](#), HL 171 2013-14, 13 May 2014

Charlie Beckett, LSE blog, [How the TV debates were organised in #GE2015 and their impact: the full story](#)

Stephen Williams MP Blog, [Election coverage must be about more than Leaders Debates](#), 17 September 2018

Electoral Reform Society, [Debating the TV Debates](#), December 2017

London School of Economics, [Televised Debates in Parliamentary Democracies](#), Media Policy Brief 13, Nick Anstead, January 2015

This paper offers insights from Australia, Canada and Germany to address three questions:

1. From experience of other parliamentary democracies, what are the problems with organising debates for the election after their first occurrence? Based on this evidence, how likely is it that the 2015 UK General Election will feature televised debates?
2. Which parties should be invited to participate in pre-election debates and on what rationale?
3. How should debates of this kind be organised and regulated?

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