

Televised Election Debates

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Televised Election Debates

International Perspectives

Edited by

Stephen Coleman

Director of Studies

The Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government

London

Foreword by David Butler

Nuffield College

Oxford



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Foreword

A long-standing gap in the literature on elections has been a comparative study of televised election debates. These events have now become significant features of electioneering and it is useful for them to be evaluated critically. In bringing together such a distinguished group of international commentators, programme-makers and political practitioners, Stephen Coleman, who has contributed ably to the study of the role of debate and public deliberation within the democratic process, has enhanced our understanding of political communication and elections.

As Chairman of the Hansard Society, which exists to promote parliamentary democracy, I observed closely the abortive planning of the 1997 televised leaders' debate. Stephen Coleman's King-Hall paper, published in the midst of the negotiations, provided a significant contribution to our understanding of what televised debates have been or can be. This volume takes the study further.

The greatest change in election campaigning in this century has been the growing pre-eminence of television as the medium of publicity, commentary and discussion. Whether we like it or not, elections have moved away from campaigning in the localities to campaigning in television studios. The broadcasters of today work in close relationship with centrally managed party machines.

In the middle of the 1950 election, Churchill could spend an uninterrupted four hours gossiping with me, an unknown young academic. Today no leading politician could be so aloof from the mass media at election time. He would be on air or preparing to go on air. The transformation that television brought to British politics in 1959 has now been manifest almost everywhere, as I have seen watching the revolution that has overtaken Indian elections.

We have been talking about television debates in Britain since the 1960s when Sir Robin Day first propagandised for them. Perhaps at last politicians will listen to his plea.

DAVID BUTLER
Nuffield College, Oxford

Preface

The 1960 televised debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon represented a coming-of-age of television as not only a reporter of political events, but a principal arena in which the drama of politics would be played out. Televised election debates have since become a feature of most constitutional democracies; in those countries where they have taken place they have served to dramatise the electoral contest and played their part in creating a more informed electorate; both in countries where they have and have not taken place the debate about having a debate has tended to become an unavoidable election issue.

This volume is not dedicated to the promotion of televised election debates. Some of these events are deadly boring and manifestly over-rehearsed. Critics of televised debates will continue to have a point as long as they can point to the stage-managed nature of so much of contemporary politics, of which the great televised leaders' encounters seem to be symbolic. But television is here to stay, and new technologies of political communication are fast developing. The chapters that follow are a study of how television, in various national settings, has provided a forum for election debate and how it might do so in the future.

A democratic society needs more than just election debates every few years. If these debates are to nourish civic culture they must be embedded in an ever-developing culture of public deliberation: one which utilises every medium of communication, interactive as well as broadcast; popular as well as erudite. This political need must be addressed in what is an increasingly mediated society where, paradoxically, public civic space is becoming more scarce, and civil political discourse more marginalised, despite the growth of new means of disseminating information and facilitating expansive discussion.

When I set out to put this book together, much supported by the encouragement of Sunder Katwala at the publishers, I planned to invite the most eminent thinkers on this subject to contribute. To my surprise, most of those I asked were more than willing to write chapters, and as a result what follows is a remarkable collection, produced by an eminent and eclectic group of debate participants, producers, negotiators and academic commentators from several countries and disciplines. As a

result, most of the people I would want to acknowledge for having helped me to make sense of this subject are contributors to the pages which follow. I am particularly grateful to David Butler for his enthusiastic interest, and to Sir Robin Day and John Grist of the BBC who have always been forthcoming with information and ideas.

My wife Bernadette regards much of what passes as political debate on television as futile rituals in which 'aggressive men shout at each other'. She has endured the process of this book being produced with much patience and has contributed editorially to its production, as well as my peace of mind, in more ways than I could possibly thank her for here.

STEPHEN COLEMAN
the Hansard Society, London

Notes on the Contributors

Christopher Adasiewicz is a researcher at Princeton Survey Research in Washington D.C.

Arnold Amber is an executive producer in the news department of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and was the lead negotiator for the consortium which broadcast the 1993 and 1997 federal debates. In 1994 he headed the team which advised SABC on the negotiation for and production of the first South African TV election debate.

Shoshana Blum-Kulka is Professor of Sociolinguistics in the Department of Communication and Education at the Hebrew University. Her research explores the relationships between language, society and culture in interpersonal and media discourse. Her latest book is *Dinner Talk: Cultural Patterns of Sociability and Socialization in Family Discourse*, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997. She is currently working on a book on media discourse.

Diana B. Carlin is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. She co-edited *The 1992 Presidential Debates in Focus*, serves on the advisory board for the Commission on Presidential Debates and was director of Debate-Watch '96.

Helen Clark is the leader of the New Zealand Labour Party and participated in the 1996 televised election debates.

Stephen Coleman is Director of Studies at the Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government, and lectures in Media and Communication at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He has written extensively on political debate, including *Televised Leaders' Debates: an Evaluation and a Proposal* and *Stilled Tongues: from Soapbox to Soundbite*.

Julie Hall is a television producer and a trustee of the Scarman Trust.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson is Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. She co-authored *Presidential Debates*, and her published volumes include *Eloquence in an Electronic Age* and *Packaging the Presidency*.

Richard Holme (Lord Holme of Cheltenham) sits in the House of Lords at Westminster and was the Liberal Democrat Election Campaign Chairman in the 1997 UK general election.

Tamar Liebes is Associate Professor at the Department Communication and Journalism, and Chair of the Smart Institute for Communication at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is the author (with Elihu Katz) of *The Export of Meaning: Cross Cultural Readings of Dallas*, and *Reporting the Arab Israeli Conflict: How Hegemony Works*.

Austin Mitchell is a British Labour MP and frequent broadcaster.

Mary Walsh lectures in the School of Management, Queensland University of Technology.

Ian Ward is a lecturer in the Department of Government, University of Queensland.