

The BBC needs to improve debate format to get more Scots tuning in

TV clashes carry more weight in this election campaign given the limited canvassing and campaigning due to the Covid pandemic



Lesley Riddoch

ARE leaders' debates gaining or losing credibility as the Holyrood election campaign rumbles on?

Tuesday's STV debate was an infinitely superior effort to the random shouting match produced by the BBC a fortnight earlier – as Auntie's own presenters appeared to concede during a radio interview yesterday in which all agreed that STV's leaders' cross examination section worked very well. Which begs the obvious question – why doesn't the BBC do that too?

Pacific Quay must take the opportunity to revise its own debate format before the final leaders' clash on Tuesday, May 4. Doubtless many will feel the missing ingredient needed to spice up debate is Alex Salmond. But all broadcasters cite Ofcom guidelines to justify his exclusion on the basis that other new parties like George Galloway's All for Unity would then have to be given airtime too. STV did give Alba an innings after the debate with a slot featuring Kenny MacAskill on Scotland Tonight – another format decision the BBC could easily decide to emulate.

Of course, the next BBC debate will have the advantage of published manifestos, which should mean less waffle and more concentrated questioning – and judging by the Scottish Greens' manifesto, there will be a wealth of new ideas. But if the BBC continues to rely on scattergun questioning by random audience members, the chance to analyse big ideas like the millionaire tax and massive rail investment will once again be squandered.

The BBC is a publicly funded broadcaster with duties and obligations to the electorate. Yet right now, the commercial broadcaster STV is doing most of

the heavy lifting. BBC Scotland really needs to up its game – otherwise many viewers will feel there's no point in tuning in for scrappy debate number three.

Will it matter if viewers stay away?

The received wisdom is that leaders' debates will have a disproportionately big impact during this election because the pandemic has limited canvassing and face-to-face campaigning.

That's true.

But lockdown means we've all become online animals aware of the important political realities being highlighted and uncovered everyday beyond the studios, podiums, microphones and virtual audiences of TV-land.

In real life.

Take the other big political media event of the week – David Tennant's cheeky stunt with Saltires as guest presenter of *Have I Got News For You* (HIGNFY). The Bathgate-born presenter played a medley of pictures featuring Union-flag-flanked Cabinet ministers and suggested the BBC might get into trouble for the programme's own flag deficit. Announcing, "I think I can fix that," a curtain of massive Saltires appeared behind Tennant who smilingly planted a small Scottish flag on his desk to laughter and applause from the London-based audience.

It was a great and telling broadcasting moment, since independence-supporting Tennant had to get the BBC production team onsite to bring off his masterful wheeze. Clearly HIGNFY is a bit of a law unto itself – but still. The Saltire moment was as eloquent as it was unexpected.

This week Sam Heughan also renewed his support for Scottish independence with a single powerful sentence – I want a neighbour, not a ruler – even though expressing "controversial" views might weaken his chances of becoming the next James Bond. In the past, fears of jeopardising a career stopped many Scots from speaking their minds – the pelters directed at Andy Murray



spring to mind – but the situation seems very different now.

And for that we must thank one man.

Boris Johnson is the missing ingredient in each Scottish leaders' debate: the Etonian Elephant in every room and the reason other stars like Ewan McGregor have also come out for Yes.

Whilst a relatively sober election campaign is conducted in Scotland, an altogether more raucous reality is played out at Westminster – it's the backdrop from hell for Douglas Ross and the gift that never stops giving for the Greens, SNP and Alba.

For starters, there's Johnson's decision to block Holyrood from enacting a landmark children's rights bill – despite a unanimous vote that included the Scottish Conservatives. Ya whit?

No-one, including Douglas Ross, seems able to explain why something so innocuous, so motherhood and apple pie, can possibly be heading for the Supreme Court.

Actually, the answer is very simple but also very awkward for a Scottish Tory leader (occasionally trying to look cuddly). In Britain might is right and Westminster is might personified. Nothing done by a subsidiary parliament can ever, ever, ever infringe on Westminster sovereignty. End of. Thus, any cosy Tory talk about a union of equals is legal nonsense. Thanks for the graphic reminder, Boris.

And thanks for the unexpectedly trenchant analysis, Oxbridge.

Ciaran Martin is now an Oxford Professor but in 2012 was a senior civil servant tasked with negotiating the Edinburgh Agreement, enabling the first independence referendum.



His new paper – Resist, Reform, Rerun? – asks which approach Boris Johnson should take if independence parties win a majority in May. Surprisingly perhaps for a man steeped in the ways of Westminster, his verdict is unequivocal – there must be a precise rerun of the first indyref without any added confirmatory referendum, different question or other London-originated change. Otherwise, there will be an endless impasse where the law is with Westminster but the votes are with Scotland and the old Union, built on consent, quietly dies. Whilst Yessers might quibble about the nature of our “consent”, a highly respected public servant is blaming Boris for leaving Scotland without any lawful or democratic route towards independence and that is hugely significant.

Cambridge academics have also been busy.

A PAPER just published by Professor Michael Kenny, researcher Jack Sheldon and Philip Rycroft (permanent secretary to the Brexit department until 2019) says the pandemic seeded the idea of a prime minister “who speaks for England alone” and produced a complete deterioration of relations between the four nations of the UK created by “deep-rooted complacency” at Whitehall.

Rycroft relates that he was astonished to find no soul-searching in Westminster in the wake of the indyref. Instead, Boris Johnson has morphed conservatism into a “muscular brand of Unionism” which asserts the value of the Union instead of trying to demonstrate it.

STV is winning the battle of the televised debates so far



No-one, not even Douglas Ross, seems able to explain why the UK is taking the fight to the Supreme Court

And in a key phrase, Rycroft says the instinct to preserve the Union is simply “not in the bloodstream of the UK state”. It seems hell hath no fury like fair-minded senior civil servants ignored and overruled.

But that’s not all.

Revelations about David Cameron lobbying for Greensill have dragged in current Cabinet ministers and raised questions about the casual cronyism of civil servants double jobbing whilst they held senior advisory roles within government. This on the back of Covid contracts for cronies, the breach of faith with Northern Ireland that’s prompted the resumption of violence, the blurt about devolution being a disaster – acts of bad faith by Boris Johnson seem never-ending. And the long list resonates each time Douglas Ross tries to suggest he could run Scotland better than Nicola Sturgeon (though given his repeated appeal for list not constituency votes, maybe that’s only a rhetorical device.)

With Boris effectively abandoning the Union down south, it really doesn’t matter which Unionist leader wants to claim Ruth Davidson’s mantle as Defender of the Faith in Scotland.

It’s over.

Even if the death of the Union is easier to see, analyse and discuss furth of oor parish.

So dinnae expect this reality to creep into any broadcast debate.

But dinnae despair.

In this vital moment between Covid and recovery, the Union-destroying behaviour of Boris Johnson and the independence-supporting gallusness of David Tennant may be just as influential in voters’ minds.

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