The leaders’ debates: three into seven might not go

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The leaders’ debates: three into seven might not go

Dominic Wring and David Deacon

After a great deal of horse trading, a timetable for the election debates has been set, culminating in a head-to-head between the prime minister, David Cameron, and his opposite number Ed Miliband a week before voters go to the polls.

If all agree (and this is still not certain), this will settle a process that seems to have dragged on for months: the major broadcasters substantially changed their format for the pre-election leaders’ debates, after Cameron threatened to boycott the event if the Green Party was not invited. But the changes may have unforeseen consequences, especially with relation to the UK’s nationalist parties.

The “4-3-2” model – which would have featured the leaders of UKIP, the Liberal Democrats, Labour and the Conservatives – has since been ditched in favour of a “7-7-2” format. The Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) – buoyed by polls indicating they are set to win the general election north of the border – have secured a place in the enlarged debates, along with their Welsh counterparts Plaid Cymru and the Greens.

I agree with Nicola

Plaid leader Leanne Wood’s presence in the debates raises the prospect of the Welsh nationalist joining her long-established SNP ally Nicola Sturgeon in a double act to face off against the others. It would not be the first time the two nationalist parties have collaborated to enhance their broadcast presence.

In 1997, Alex Salmond and Dafydd Wigley appeared together in the same BBC Panorama leader interview. In doing so, they guaranteed that their respective causes were represented in a fourth episode of the series, which was otherwise devoted to the three major party leaders.

This relationship is an enduring one. Both parties are members of the European Free Alliance (EFA) – one of the groupings in the EU parliament. The EFA works and acts as a single-party entity, containing similar independence-minded politicians from other putative break-away states, including Catalonia.

We agree with Natalie?

The EFA is also in a formal pact with Green MEPs, and this raises the scenario of the nationalists partaking in some kind of “tag team” with Green leader Natalie Bennett during the debates, whereby they could promote a common agenda centring on their shared opposition to austerity and the renewal of Trident, among other things.
This is not idle speculation, given that Plaid’s general election co-ordinator, Lord Dafydd Wigley, has recently urged voters in England to support Green candidates in the forthcoming poll. Nor is such an endorsement unprecedented: during the 1990s, both parties took the rare step of formally supporting the election of Plaid Cymru MP Cynog Dafis on a hybrid ticket.

A united Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland’s politicians have found common ground over the leaders’ debates: they would like to be involved. They argue that they may have a vital role to play in the formation of a coalition government if – as appears likely – there is another hung parliament after May 7.

But it seems unlikely these politicians will be invited, given that two of the four parties with MPs (SDLP and Alliance) already enjoy links to “sister” organisations (Labour and Liberal Democrats respectively), which do not stand candidates in the province. Broadcasters will also claim that they already provide debating opportunities for leaders of the Northern Irish parties, along with their larger rivals, the Democratic Unionists and Sinn Fein.

Empty chair or empty threat?

If Nicola Sturgeon and Leanne Wood do end up representing their parties in the debates, they will take to the stage as party leaders but, interestingly, not as prospective parliamentary candidates for the actual election.

In the former case, this anomaly is reinforced by there being three obvious alternative debaters who are also SNP Prospective Parliamentary Candidates this May: the party’s deputy leader Stewart Hosie MP, its Westminster leader Angus Robertson MP – and Alex Salmond, the former first minister at Holyrood, who has fresh experience of televised debates during the Scottish referendum campaign.

It is not inconceivable that parties such as the Greens could rotate their debate representation between Bennett and her predecessor Caroline Lucas – currently the Greens’ sole MP – in the spirit of inclusivity that has been a hallmark of their organisation.

The ability of an individual party to determine its debate representative creates a potential excuse for their rivals to opt out. David Cameron might consider sending a substitute, such as the Conservative chairman, Grant Shapps, to avoid the ignominy of being “empty chaired”. Could broadcasters refuse to accept an alternative representative?

In 1997, for instance, John Major got Michael Heseltine to deputise for him in “ITV 500: The People’s Choice”, the channel’s then key forum where undecided voters got to cross-examine each leader. Major’s no-show did provoke anger from the programme’s audience, though it was on the eve of a poll he was about to lose by a landslide, so this may not have had too much bearing on the electoral outcome. If
one or other candidates backs out in the coming weeks, they will have to face down recriminations – not least on social media where there will be no place to hide.

By Dominic Wring and David Deacon