

Election Debates: Who asks the Questions?

With mounting despair I watched the first of this General Election's TV debates, the one in which Jeremy Paxman and then an audience asked questions of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition.

I found myself asking again what I've been asking myself for quite a long time now, not least because I am a devotee of *The Today Programme* on Radio and so hear very many interviews of leading politicians. Why do interviewers like Mr Paxman, Mr Humphrys and the rest get away with treating our elected politicians, Her Majesty's Ministers, and those who aspire to elected office, with what can only be described as aggressive contempt? I suppose *they* might answer: we are performing a necessary duty for the public, holding people in power and those who aspire to power, to account. We are putting them on the spot, putting them under proper pressure to give an account of themselves and of their policies and actions. Well, maybe. But, we might ask, to whom are these interviewers accountable, by what right do they do this, or even more bluntly, who do they think they are to treat people in this way? After all, nobody has elected them. And, anyhow, what do we really learn from these gladiatorial combats – very little, I would suggest.

I'm afraid that as I watched that debate I felt ashamed, ashamed of the depths to which our televised political discourse has sunk, at least to that part of it which is in the hands of professional interviewers. I do not wish to return to the so-called "Age of Deference", but surely there is a place for civility and respect to be offered to those who hold high office and seek high office?

But, you may ask, are the politicians really worthy of civility and respect? Do they not bring a lot of this upon themselves? After all, they seem willing to subject themselves to what is, when all is said and done, a kind of abuse. Perhaps they are as much to blame by colluding in this degrading spectacle. Why don't they just walk out, as John Nott did on Robin Day all those years ago? Are they in thrall to the media – maybe, but those who live by the media often die by it.

Of course, in the debate with which I began, both David Cameron and Ed Miliband were required to answer questions from the audience. Compared with Mr Paxman, I thought the audience won hands down and that gave me some hope! The politicians had a chance to engage and, to give each credit, that is precisely what they tried to do. And might that not be a better way of staging

these debates at election time – dispensing with the professional interviewers and letting the voting public ask whatever they want to ask and come back with supplementaries if they want to – this used to be what happened, for example, on BBC Radio's *Election Call*. And, I suppose, this is what hustings, which many of our churches help to organise, are all about.

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