

BBC's election challengers' debate

Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru and Green Party offer “progressive alliance” with Labour

By Chris Marsden
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The BBC challenger's debate Thursday involved all the major party leaders, except David Cameron and Nick Clegg for the outgoing Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. It was notable primarily for exposing the depth of the desire of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru (the Party of Wales) for an alliance with Labour.

Nicola Sturgeon of the SNP and, somewhat less forcefully, Plaid's Leanne Wood pleaded with Miliband to form what they ludicrously called a “progressive alliance” to keep out the Conservatives—one that would also include the Green Party. Natalie Bennett, the Green Party's leader, made some mildly critical noises in the hope of being included later in the political horse-trading.

The debate up to Miliband's exchange with Sturgeon was forgettable.

Sturgeon, Wood and Bennett were able to score a few points at Labour's expense, portraying their parties as being “anti-austerity.” They all opposed the renewal of the Trident nuclear submarine programme, while the presence of Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) allowed for some posturing as being less xenophobic and anti-immigrant.

But always their remarks were weak and constrained. Sturgeon's pose of opposition to Trident was somewhat queered by Miliband being able to point to the SNP having come out in favour of the NATO nuclear alliance. Bennett felt obliged to stress the Greens' commitment to maintaining military spending at 2 percent of GDP and echoed Sturgeon's call for this to be directed towards building up Britain's

conventional armed forces.

On immigration, Sturgeon's opposition to imposing targeted reductions was raised only after her professed concern that nations should be able to effectively control their borders and determine who was allowed in. She made clear that her stand on immigration was determined primarily by the economic criteria of Scotland's skills shortage and a need to attract, and possibly to retain after graduation, highly qualified students.

None of this matched the generally left tenor of the audience—despite the fact that it was chosen for the BBC by an external polling organisation to reflect a cross section of opinion.

Farage was so incensed by the negative response to his numerous attacks on immigrants and the applause given to any reference to ending austerity that he declared from the podium, “[This] is a remarkable audience even by the left-wing standards of the BBC.”

He was booed loudly for his outburst.

Giving the lie to all else that went before, however—including her own pointing out that Miliband had committed Labour to £30 billion of cuts—Sturgeon focused on repeated appeals to form an anti-Tory coalition to “lock the Tories out” of government.

“The polls will show Ed isn't strong enough to get rid of the Tories on his own,” she said. “I will work with Labour, with Leanne, with Natalie, so that together we can get rid of the Tories.”

Her stated mission in such an alliance was a desire for “Ed” to “replace the Tories with something different, better, more progressive ... What I'm saying

is that I can help Labour be bolder to deliver the changes we need.”

“Don’t turn your back on that, Ed, and let David Cameron back into Downing Street”, she reiterated. “Is it the case that you would rather see David Cameron go back into Downing Street than work with the SNP? Surely that cannot be your position.”

Sturgeon’s pleas helped cover for Miliband’s right-wing austerity agenda, in a week that Labour issued its manifesto beginning with what it describes a “Budget Responsibility Lock.”

This pledge to endless austerity promises that no policy of Labour’s “requires additional borrowing.”

“A Labour government will cut the deficit every year,” it states. “The first line of Labour’s first Budget will be: ‘This Budget cuts the deficit every year’.”

In addition Labour promises to “legislate to require all major parties to have their manifesto commitments independently audited by the Office for Budget Responsibility.” What price then, Sturgeon’s “progressive alliance” to end austerity?

All that Sturgeon achieved was to allow Miliband to adopt a statesmanlike pose as the possible future prime minister. “I have fought the Conservatives all my life,” he said. “We have profound differences. That why I’m not going to have a coalition with the SNP. I’m not going to put at risk the unity of the United Kingdom. It’s a no, I’m afraid.”

Plaid Cymru’s Wood, seemingly equally oblivious to reality, embarrassingly challenged Miliband to hold an “emergency budget” to end austerity if he becomes prime minister.

The debate ended with a few platitudes from the assembled candidates, framed as closing remarks.

As events closed Sturgeon, Wood and Bennett collectively walked to Miliband’s podium to publicly shake hands with him. Commenting favourably in the *Guardian*, Jonathan Jones spoke of a “triumvirate of left-wing women” and “anti-austerity parties ... making the running”. An accompanying picture makes clear the reality that they are all running straight into the arms of Ed.

The debate was yet another example of the vast and growing chasm between working people and all the myriad parties of big business and the super-rich. Earlier this month, all seven party leaders engaged in their only combined debate of the election campaign on

ITV UK party (several leaders’ debate: Pro-business parties discuss how best to impose austerity”). Cameron has insisted that all other televised appearances do not involve face-to-face meetings, leading to plans for a “Question Time” special on the BBC, one week before May 7 polling day, in which Cameron, Miliband and Clegg will appear and be questioned by the audience separately.

This is a pathetic effort on Cameron’s part to shield the Tories from any possible attack on their record in office. However, on Thursday night it had an additional and unintended effect. The various “challengers” to the Tories were all exposed as having nothing of substance to offer working people.

Labour was left with no one to its right, other than the increasingly unhinged Farage, behind which it could conceal its own pro-austerity and militarist programme. The two nationalist parties and the Greens, for their part, made clear that they will happily sell every one of their own meagre election pledges in return for a seat in government and a chance for a greater share of national tax revenues for the bourgeoisie in Scotland and Wales—and for the benefit of their own grasping upper-middle class supporters.

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