

The Leaders Debate: How Democratic?

John Uhr

Political Science Program

Research School of Social Sciences

Australian National University

What can we make of the ‘great debate’ between Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition leader Mark Latham televised live on the Nine network on the evening of Sunday the 12th of September? Where does the Australian experience fit in the larger world of democratic politics? What lessons about the state of Australian democracy can be taken from Sunday’s televised debate?

Some things we know already. For instance, that Nine’s studio audience of 90 ‘undecided’ viewers rated Latham the victor by 67 per cent to Howard’s 33 per cent. Latham got quite a boost of self-confidence from this win, calling for more ‘democracy in the raw’. John Howard was suitably modest, stating that he was glad that ‘the worm did not have a vote’, referring to Nine’s electronic graphic recording viewers’ reactions. Howard ought to know, because this 67/33 split is the same ‘winning’ score by which Kim Beazley was awarded victory in the 2001 great debate, before he went on to lose the election to Howard. But more importantly, Nine’s home audience of 1.4 million viewers was swamped by Ten’s *Australian Idol* audience of 2.3 million. Even Treasurer Peter Costello revealed that after 20 minutes of the great debate he wondered aloud whether ‘anyone in Australia is still switched in’ (*The Australian*, 14 September 2004, p. 6).

The debate was billed as ‘the leaders’ debate’, with the implication that these are the two political leaders who really matter. This billing makes sense in that these two candidates are leaders of the only major political parties seriously intent on winning government. Only Howard and Latham are campaigning for the right to head the national government. But there are many other party leaders with claims to political

leadership. For starters, Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson leads the Nationals which are just as serious about participating in national government as are the Liberals and Labor. Then there are the leaders of the smaller parties which typically defy their ‘minor party’ label by exercising quite significant political and policy leverage: the Australian Democrats and the Greens having stand-out candidates who have demonstrated their leadership roles in the way they have managed their political muscle in the Senate to modify many of the most entrenched plans of both Howard and Latham. In Canada the leaders of all four parliamentary parties participate in the leaders’ debates – and in French as well as English!

So why Sunday’s focus on this neat binary contest between the serving Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition? The Australian leaders’ debate is loosely derived from United States system which is one of presidential government. Australia is not a presidential system, and Australian general elections are not about the election of a president. Odd then to find *The Australian* editorialising that the leaders’ debate ‘is the campaign’s most parliamentary moment’ (*The Australian* 13 September 2004, p. 10). This comment suggests that parliamentary debate is primarily about who is fit to govern, reflecting a kind of presidential image of leadership. It is thus no surprise that many Australian voters regard the Australian televised debate as a bit odd, because the US model does not neatly fit Australian circumstances. Yes, it is true that leaders of the two major political parties prefer to see themselves as presidential figures. And yes it is probably true that their two political parties increasingly view the office of prime minister in presidential terms. But Australian electors know that it is not their role, even if they are card carrying party members, to determine who heads either of these two political parties. That role is performed by the parliamentary party, and the electors’ primary job is to vote for local candidates who, if elected, will help form one or other party caucus.

A model of leaders’ debate derived from a presidential system is not an ideal model for a parliamentary system. So my first lesson is that Australian democracy is not well-served by relying on a model of leaders’ debate derived from a presidential system.

Remember when Latham took the long handle to Howard to ‘take the Australian people into his trust’ and tell them whether he was determined to serve the full parliamentary term as party leader? Howard quite correctly answered that this choice was not his alone. Party leaders, even of governing parties, only remain in that position so long as they retain the confidence of their parliamentary followers. Howard could well have asked the same question of Latham, and the answer would have been the same: it all depends on the will of the parliamentary party. This small exchange in the televised debate illustrates the misfit between the original presidential model and the quite different Australian circumstances of parliamentary government.

But given that the leaders of the two main largest political parties like the idea of a national televised ‘leaders’ debate’, how can we improve the democratic potential of the prevailing Australian model? Judged even against the ill-fitting US standards, the Australian practice is quite defective. If we want to take the US as our model, then at least take home the right lessons.

First, bring the audience back in from the cold. The televised debate had the two leaders standing at their podiums before five seated journalists. There was an audience in the television studio but they were relegated to a separate room, presumably watching on television screens, where they were asked to record their impressions which were later consolidated into ‘the worm’ – that moving profile of preferences that wriggled its way across the bottom of the screen. If we must follow US practice, then the first step is to leave the worm to some other body of viewers and to bring the studio audience back before the leaders. Democracy is strengthened when political leaders debate one another in front of a live audience, whose very body language adds democratic value to the event – and whose relegation to a separate studio drains the event of much of its public value.

Second, bring back Ray Martin: or at least replace the five seated journalists with a single moderator. The US evidence suggests that viewers take less interest in debates involving panels of questioners and more interest in debates involving single moderators. Why might this be? Howard probably knows the answer, which is why he

opted for this model which protects politicians by having them share airtime with talkative journalists, each with their own set of preoccupations nicely interrupting the momentum of earlier answers. I suspect that the five journalists took up a quarter of the airtime with their own questions, which left the two leaders with less time to make mistakes and more time to hide behind untested clichés. By contrast, viewers seem to prefer the contribution of a single moderator who can put questions and also follow-up evasive or misleading answers, thereby injecting some real debate into the stage-managed media conference seen on Sunday the 12th.

Third, give the public more time to get the measure of the two leaders. Again, the US experience is instructive. Three debates, not just the one offering. And each debate to last 90 minutes, not 60 minutes – although that period might nicely capture the brand name of the sponsoring organization at the Nine network.

A fourth lesson might be to rethink the choice of sponsoring organisations. For what it is worth, the US experience began with commercial television sponsoring the famous 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates, but sponsorship later went to the League of Women Voters, then in the late 1980s to the Commission on Presidential Debates which has since institutionalised, and professionalised, the practice of national televised political debates. The point is that democracy gains something from ‘not for profit’ sponsors of political debate, and Australian democracy has a lot to learn about the role of public-interest organisations in managing public deliberation.

There are many additional lessons about alternative formats for leaders’ debates. One basic move would be to broaden the range of political leaders to include at the very least, the viewpoints and perspectives of the established parliamentary parties – minor as well as major. The US experience has at least recognized the role of ‘third candidates’ such as Ross Perot who won equal time during the 1992 presidential debates, as did John Anderson in the 1980 debates.

But keep all this in perspective. It is worth noting that the US viewing audience has steadily fallen over the years. Voters are not all that interested in even the loser US

version of leaders' debates. Perhaps more radical alternatives should be considered. One option is to get leaders and audience to switch places, with the audience doing more of the talking and the leaders doing more of the listening. Another option is to get the leaders out of the television studio. One version of this is Latham's so-called 'town hall' meeting where leaders simply invite the public to come forward with their own thoughts and suggestions, with the leader responding to initiatives from the public. We have a lot of distance to travel before Australian practices of leaders' debates measure up as valuable democratic experiences. Alan Ramsey has written a succinct history of the depressing Australian experience of leaders' debates ([Sydney Morning Herald 15 September 2004, p. 17](#)). The task now is to wrestle the future of leaders' debates from the grip of the leaders themselves. Dealing the people back in is the first step in strengthening the democratic value of political debate.