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## That Harris-Trump Debate

While various nonsenses spouted by the former president were “fact-checked” by the moderators, the vice president’s completely clueless propaganda was endorsed and reinforced.



Donald Trump and Kamala Harris on Tuesday. (C-Span)

I just sat through a recording of the Trump/Harris debate. Ignoring the merits of their political stances, I agree with the general consensus that Vice President Kamala Harris “won” in performance terms, but only because former President Donald Trump was awful.

Both were of course terrible on Palestine. While I appreciate that that is of most interest to perhaps a majority of my readers, and that it is a key issue for a significant slice of U.S. voters, it is not what this post is about. I am considering more broadly the prospects for who becomes U.S. president.

Trump's ability to make a coherent argument appears to have deserted him and he was easily sidetracked by Harris into irrelevant quibbles, notably on rally attendances.

Harris said nothing even vaguely impressive herself and was wide open to attack on her own record. Trump did not seem sufficiently in command of the logic of debate effectively to counterpunch.

I suspect that the debate will have done very little to affect public support, because Trump's attack messages on immigration will motivate his followers regardless, and he kept banging them out.

But I wanted to focus on the shameless bias of the moderators in favour of Harris. The framing of questions to each candidate was far more hostile towards Trump. Let me take the first four questions asked — two to each candidate:

**David Muir to Trump:**

“Mr President, I do want to drill down on something you both brought up. The vice president brought up your tariffs, you responded, and let's drill down on this. Because your plan, it is what she calls, it is essentially, a national sales tax.

Your proposal calls for tariffs, as you pointed out here, on foreign imports across the board. You recently said that you might double your plan, imposing tariffs of 20 percent on goods coming into this country.

As you know, many economists say that with tariffs at that level, costs are then passed on to the consumer. Vice President Harris has said it will mean higher prices on gas, food, clothing, medication, arguing it will cost the typical family nearly \$4,000 a year. Do you believe Americans can afford higher prices because of tariffs?”

Note what is happening here. Muir twice quotes Harris and validates her assertion that a tariff is a sales tax: “it is what she calls, *it is essentially*, a national sales tax.”

He then quotes Harris again on it costing American families \$4,000 a year. His question then to Trump is not framed as whether he agrees with Harris' assertion, but the much more loaded question of “Do you believe Americans can afford higher prices?”

I am in general inclined towards free trade myself, but a tariff is not simply a sales tax, and the \$4,000 a year claim is utter nonsense.



Muir and Trump. (C-Span)

The average U.S. household spends only about 11 percent of its consumption on imported goods. That equates to about \$8,000 worth of imported goods per household per year.

Even if Trump were to slap a 20 percent tariff on all imported goods — which is not his plan — and even if all those goods currently enjoyed zero tariff — which is certainly not the case — and even if there were no import substitution and the entire cost was passed on to the consumer — neither of which would be the case, it plainly is not remotely possible that a 20 percent tariff on part of \$8,000 of spending could cost \$4,000.

But whereas various nonsenses spouted by Trump were “fact-checked” by the moderators, Harris’s completely clueless propaganda was endorsed and reinforced.

Trump however ought to have been able to counter by talking of the purpose of promoting domestic production and encouraging domestic industry and agriculture. His inability to do so — and indeed to counterpunch with logical refutation on anything — made this deeply unsatisfying watching.

### **Linsey Davis to Trump**

“I want to turn to the issue of abortion. President Trump you have often touted that you were able to kill Roe v Wade last year. You said that you were proud to be the most pro-life president in American history. Then last month you said that your administration would be great for women and their reproductive rights. In your home state of Florida you surprised many with regard to your six-week abortion ban because you initially said that it was too short and said (quote) “I am going to be voting that we need more than six weeks.”

But then the very next day you reversed course and said that you would vote to support the six-week ban. Vice President Harris says that women should not trust you on the issue of

abortion because you have changed your position so many times. Therefore why should they trust you?”



Davis and Trump. (C-Span)

Note the aggression in the phrasing of this question, and the use of the negative connotation verb “touting” in the setup. Also the use of amplifier phrases... “the very next day.”

Now contrast the tone with the superficially “combative” questions to challenge Harris.

**David Muir to Harris:**

“We are going to turn now to immigration and border security. We know it’s an issue to Republicans, Democrats, voters across the board in this country. Vice President Harris, you were tasked by President Biden with getting to the root causes of migration from Central America.

We know that illegal border crossings reached a high in the Biden administration. This past June, President Biden passed tough new asylum restrictions. We know the numbers since then have dropped significantly. But my question to you tonight is why did the administration wait until six months before the election to act, and would you have done anything differently from President Biden on this?”

This is fascinating because plainly the intention is to appear to be tackling Harris, while the entire framing of the question is slanted to favour her.

The characterisation of Harris’ role is precisely the framing of her campaign team: she was not in charge of border control or immigrant policy, but rather of tackling “the root causes” of immigration. This is exactly how Harris wants it put, but not really true.

Furthermore the problem is presented as essentially solved, again an extremely dubious proposition, and the question is basically — why did it take you so long?

After a couple of exchanges between the candidates Muir leapt in to interject and reinforce a point already made by Kamala Harris.

**David Muir:**

“President Trump on that point I am going to invite your response”

**Trump:**

“Well I would like to respond”

**David Muir:**

“Let me just ask though, why did you try to kill that bill, and successfully do so, that would have put thousands of extra agents on the border?”



(C-Span screen shot)

Let us then look at the framing of another “challenging” question to Harris:

**Lindsey David to Harris:**

“Vice President Harris, in your last run for president you said you wanted to ban fracking, now you don’t. You wanted mandatory buyback programmes for assault weapons, now your campaign says you don’t.

You supported decriminalising border crossings, now you are taking a harder line. I know you say that your values have not changed, so then why have so many of your policy positions changed?”

Note how, with both questions to Harris, the answer is provided within the question. The immigration question was presented as solved and the flip flop question as reflecting consistent values. Harris did grab on to the proffered lifeline and banged on about her values as a “middle class kid” and all the hard luck cases she claimed to have been inspired to help. On Palestine, naturally both vied to present themselves as the staunchest supporters of Israel. Kamala Harris did genuflect towards protection of Palestinian civilians and the Palestinian right of self-determination, but this was so obviously a token gesture from Israel’s chief armers and funders as to not need further comment.

All in all, extremely dispiriting. Harris came over as an entirely unprincipled political operator who will adopt whatever positions serve her career, but is rather more intellectually competent than previously expected. Trump came over as a loose cannon which nobody has loaded.

As with U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer, there is no doubt that Harris is the Deep State shoo-in candidate, and the priming of the debate in her favour is hardly unexpected. It does require an effort of textual analysis to pin it down, and I hope I have given you a start on that.

**Craig Murray is an author, broadcaster and human rights activist. He was British ambassador to Uzbekistan from August 2002 to October 2004 and rector of the University of Dundee from 2007 to 2010. His coverage is entirely dependent on reader support. Subscriptions to keep this blog going are gratefully received.**

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