Channel 4 response to the Lords Communications Committee’s report on broadcast General Election debates

Channel 4 welcomes the Lords Communications Committee’s report into broadcast General Election debates, which provides a significant contribution to the discussion around future television debates in the UK.

The Committee is right to recognise the importance of General Election debates and their ability to engage the public in the electoral process. Television remains a hugely powerful medium for informing viewers: 89% of individuals use television as a platform for their news, significantly higher than for any other platform. As such, the debates have the potential to increase interest in, and awareness of, political developments in the UK at a time of continued low voter turnout. We would note, in particular, that amongst 18-24s, the age demographic with the lowest turnout rate, television still remains more popular than newspapers and online for the consumption of news.

The report raises a number of important issues in relation to the General Election debates, in particular in relation to diversity and voter participation, which we look forward to discussing with relevant parties in the coming months. Channel 4’s response to the report’s specific recommendations relating to broadcasters is outlined below.

**Recommendation: We simply note here that this concern [that the debates ‘presidentialised’ the General Election] exists and that there may be a role for the broadcasters to play in helping the public to understand that they are not electing a president or even, for that matter, a Prime Minister.**

By their very nature, the General Election debates are focused on the political party leaders rather than local candidates. However, it is important to view the debates in the wider context of a broadcaster’s overall coverage of each General Election. Where possible, television election coverage – from news reports of the campaign trail to election night analyses of results across the UK – provides a spotlight for prospective parliamentary candidates in specific constituencies as well as the party leaders. We believe that this, in turn, can have a positive impact on the public’s understanding of the UK’s parliamentary system of governance and can reinforce the fact that they are electing a local candidate rather than the Prime Minister directly.

**Recommendation: The suggestion made by some that eligibility to participate in televised debates should be based on an established vote share threshold or solely on opinion polling should not be adopted. Instead, it must be recognised that the decision about who is invited to participate in television programmes will have to continue to be one that is consistent with the legal and regulatory framework around broadcasting. Of course, the decision to accept a broadcaster’s invitation to participate in a television programme remains voluntary.**

As outlined in our initial evidence to the Committee, Channel 4 believes that it is important that decisions on party participation in General Election debates remain editorial decisions
for broadcasters and are not a matter for political negotiation. Such decisions are likely to be based on a range of electoral considerations that broadcasters deem appropriate – which may include, though not necessarily restricted to, data such as opinion polling and previous electoral performance, as well as with reference to the wider political context. Any decision on participation must also be taken within the parameters of the existing regulatory framework that requires broadcasters to provide ‘due weight’ to ‘major parties’ and ‘appropriate coverage’ for other political parties.

Recommendation: We have carefully considered the potential case for a body to be established independently of the broadcasters to oversee and produce broadcast election debates in the UK. We have found no good arguments for the introduction of such a body.

Channel 4 agrees with the Committee that there is no clear case for establishing an independent body to oversee the broadcast General Election debates. We do not believe that such an organisation is appropriate or necessary in the UK. Much of the work undertaken by such bodies – including the Commission on Presidential Debates in the United States – tends to be focused on establishing sets of principles that are already enshrined within the UK’s regulatory framework, such as requirements relating to impartiality and due weight during elections. It is also important that broadcasters retain editorial flexibility within individual programmes and across all election programming, and as such we feel that any independent body would have little work to undertake after the initial decisions on the number, timings and allocations of the debates were made.

We believe that creating such a body would therefore add an unnecessary additional layer of complexity to the process of establishing General Election debates, particularly given that it would not have the authority to compel political parties to take part, nor could it override broadcasters’ existing statutory obligations. As such, it is not clear what an external body would deliver that broadcasters could not achieve themselves within an improved process that includes increased transparency and a clear focus on public interest objectives.

We encourage the broadcasters, in particular the PSBs, mindful of their obligations and public purposes, to take very seriously the opportunities to develop activities around the debates to provide voter information and stimulate the public to be interested in the electoral process more generally, perhaps along lines similar to the activities undertaken by the CPD in the US.

Channel 4 takes seriously its public service remit to stimulate well-informed debate and promote new perspectives, both on political issues and wider issues of societal importance. Channel 4 is committed to providing programming in this area across a range of genres and formats within its schedule. Our highly-regarded flagship news programme, Channel 4 News, is widely regarded as providing a unique perspective on political developments in the UK, with Gary Gibbon (Political Editor) and Michael Crick (Political Correspondent) regularly reporting on the electoral process and policy proposals of political parties.
Alongside this coverage, Channel 4’s wider output – from award-winning documentaries to investigative current affairs programming – regularly provides analysis of a number of key policy issues that are central to the political process and elections in the UK. In recent years, this has included a focus on healthcare (24 Hours in A&E), immigration (Why Don’t You Speak English?), education (Educating Yorkshire), the welfare system (Benefits Street), energy prices (Dispatches: Energy Bills Exposed), housing (How to Get a Council House) and crime (999: What’s Your Emergency?). Online and digital engagement around these programmes allows Channel 4 to provide viewers with additional relevant information, including through the use of accompanying apps and websites with further content on the issues in question. We believe that the dual approach of hard-hitting political journalism alongside considered analysis of policy issues across our entire schedule ensures that we already generate significant interest in the electoral process and the subjects that encompass it amongst our audiences.

We continue to develop out activity in this area – in line with our remit to demonstrate innovation and creativity in our content – including through a range of new commissions focused on key policy areas. We look forward to discussing with other broadcasters potential activity around this issue in the near future.

**Recommendation:** *We endorse the proposal made by Channel 4 for the introduction by the broadcasters of a clearer two-stage process in the set-up of the election debates potentially to be broadcast in 2015 and beyond.*

*In particular, the first stage should include the publication of a statement of principles about the format and purpose of the debates as television programmes and should also provide a clarification about why, on that basis, the broadcasters approached the invited political parties and which types of criteria were used in doing so.*

Channel 4 welcomes the Committee’s endorsement of our proposals to introduce a two-stage process in the set-up of the General Election debates.

As we outlined in our original written evidence, Channel 4 believes that establishing key principles which set out the guiding purposes and objectives of the General Election debates and using them to help guide relevant administrative decisions – such as the number of debates and which broadcasters take part – would help to maintain public trust in the debates and ensure that decisions are focused on delivering the public interest.

**Recommendation:** *We encourage the broadcasters to consider developing a single online portal for the debates on which the general public could find all the information they could need or want in connection with the debates, including details of election coverage, the published agreements reached about the debates and access points for viewing the debates during and after their transmission.*

Channel 4 agrees that it is important that voters are able to access key information about the General Election debates, including the key principles outlined above, as well as details
of the coverage, in an easy and engaging manner. We maintain that it is vital that such significant democratic events, which have the potential to impact on the electorate’s voting intentions, are as transparent as possible in order to maintain public trust in them. Given the distinctive roles and audiences of each broadcaster, it is important to recognise the potential merits of adopting different approaches to providing information on the debates. We look forward to discussing suitable ways to provide this information to the public, including the possibility of an online portal, with other broadcasters in the coming months.

**Recommendation:** We recognise that the choice of moderator for each debate is a matter of each broadcaster’s own editorial judgement. Should broadcast election debates take place in 2015 and beyond, we recommend that the broadcasters ensure they exercise that judgement, reflecting our concern, and mindful of the disappointingly uniform outcome of their decisions in 2010.

Channel 4 believes that, given the democratic nature of the General Election debates, diversity needs to be at the centre of the approach to potential debates in 2015 and beyond. As a public service broadcaster with a statutory remit to cater to a culturally diverse society, we are fully aware of the importance of ensuring that the rich mix of different cultures and ethnicities within the UK are represented both on-screen and off-screen in broadcasting.

The selection of a moderator for each debate remains an editorial decision for broadcasters to make. Nonetheless, we welcome the Committee’s acknowledgement that Channel 4’s *Ask the Chancellors* debate in 2010, having been presented by Channel 4 News presenter Krishnan Guru-Murthy, broke the mould in relation to the ethnic diversity of moderators.

We would further note that while on-screen diversity remains important, greater emphasis should also be placed on attracting a diverse range of viewers and, in particular, ensuring that the debates appeal to hard to reach groups, including those of BAME origin and younger viewers. Channel 4 has continually sought to achieve this within its own news coverage, with Channel 4 News disproportionately popular among younger and BAME viewers, driven in part by its strong digital presence across websites, apps and social media.

**Recommendation:** We recommend that those taking part in the negotiations for the 2015 broadcast general election debates might wish to address each of the issues he [Professor Alan Schroeder] raises.

We welcome Professor Schroeder’s contribution to the wider discussion on the process and format of the General Election debates and support the principles behind many of his suggestions. We look forward to discussing these issues as part of the ongoing negotiations with other broadcasters and political parties.

In particular, we agree that there are significant advantages in adopting voter-friendly formats for the debates, including the involvement of the general public in the questions to the leaders. We also agree with Professor Schroeder about the importance of ensuring transparency in the negotiations to enable voters to scrutinise whether decisions being
made are in the public interest. This, in turn, will help to maintain public trust and support for the debates in the long term. As outlined above, we believe that this can be best achieved through the publication of key principles which provide a guide to the objectives of the debates.

Professor Schroeder is also right to argue that the debates should be approached “as a starting point for political engagement, rather than an end unto themselves” and that social media “creates a perfect opportunity to apply innovative approaches to such discussions.” Channel 4 has been a pioneer in its use of second screen and multi-platform content, and looks forward to considering how General Election debates can make the best use of social media.

**Recommendation:** We share the view that the simple format of the debates allowed the viewer to concentrate on a serious debate about serious issues without the distraction of too much other information appearing on the screen. This is another argument against the use of the worm.

Specific issues relating to the format of the debates – including the use of on-screen graphics – are ultimately editorial decisions for the chosen broadcasters to make. At this early stage of negotiations, Channel 4 believes that it would be inappropriate to make formal commitments relating to format, but we nonetheless agree with the Committee about the importance of ensuring that viewers engage with the debate and issues discussed.

**Recommendation:** The negotiators for the broadcast general election debates in 2015 and beyond should ensure that the format evolves as necessary to maintain or increase the levels of voter engagement seen in 2010. This should always be balanced against the risk of making proposals for change that jeopardise the debates taking place.

Channel 4 believes that there is scope to evolve the format of the 2010 General Election debates to allow for greater interactivity and engagement with viewers. In particular, we feel that it would be desirable for voters to be more involved in the debate itself, rather than mere observers of a one-way political discussion, which therefore will necessitate a change in the way in which the party leaders are asked questions.

Specific changes to the format of the debates are, of course, ultimately the responsibility of broadcasters and will be chosen in due course, but as a public service broadcaster with a remit to demonstrate innovation and experimentation and stimulate debate we would support greater voter engagement within the debates.

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