

Conservative and Unionist Central Office

TV debates

Broadsheeting

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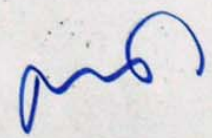
10th August 1978

MRS THATCHER

SECRET

c.c.

Mr Whitelaw
Lord Thorneycroft
Mr Atkins
Mr Maude
Lady Young
Mr Lindsey
Mr Reece
Mr Stanley
Mr Wolfson



At previous elections attempts to arrange such a debate had broken down on the attitude of the minor Parties. Mr Trethowan could not envisage a satisfactory format for the debate involving the Leader of any of the minor Parties, and he suggested that if they were brought in it would diminish the Leaders of the two great Parties.

Mr Trethowan said that if a debate took place without the involvement of the Leaders of the minor Parties it would be only proper that their interests should not suffer too grievously and there would have to be other opportunities for them to put their case.

Mr Trethowan put the case for a televised debate. It would be an opportunity for the nation to see a discussion between the only two people who could become Prime Minister after the election. If a debate was worth having it was on this basis only.

Lord Thorneycroft said that the Conservative Party would have to consider the impact of such an event on Parliamentary Government. Something more than Party advantage would be weighed in our reply. We were discussing a General Election in the United Kingdom, not a Presidential election or the election of two alternative Prime Ministers. A British General Election was a contest between Parties with alternative programmes and the tradition of debate between all Parties was of great importance.

Mr Trethowan said the two major Parties would inevitably project their Leaders as much as possible. Historically the Parties had relied principally on the presentation of policy by their Leaders. As far as the public were concerned the election was a contest between the Party Leaders. Mr Hardiman Scott added that it was the Conservative and Labour Parties that mattered above all and that the two people who could really express what their Parties would do were the Leaders.

Lord Thorneycroft agreed that the contest between the Parties had become more personalised during his lifetime but he could not accept that politics had become a contest between Party Leaders and he did not personally believe that it would be good for the health of British politics if it were to develop further in this direction. To move in this direction would be a decision of major importance.

Mr Trethowan outlined the alternative formats for debate which the BBC proposed:

- (1) The broadcasters' preferred format was the model recently tried in France. The two protagonists would face each other across a table. There would be a Chairman. He would invite the Leaders to discuss economic issues for a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes and then to move on to discuss social questions, or whatever. He would not be an interviewer, but would be responsible for keeping the participants on the right main subjects and for preventing either from monopolising the discussion.

(2) Alternatively the format used in Presidential elections in the USA could be the model. The two protagonists would be on either side of a stage facing towards an audience (imaginary or real) and answering questions put by selected journalists. The journalists would start by asking each Leader the same question. It would be important for the success of the debate that they should then be able to come back with further exploratory questions and perhaps invite the Leaders to comment on what had been said. Among the journalists envisaged were David Watt, Peter Jenkins and Fred Emery. There would be a Chairman of debate who would invite the journalists to put their questions, keep time etc.

(3) A third alternative was to have each Leader interviewed by a different journalist.

The BBC preferred the first proposal as being perhaps nearer the Parliamentary tradition and more informative. The American model would be comparatively dull and rigid. Mr Trethowan imagined that the Party Leaders might also prefer the absence of interviewers chipping in. He recognised that this format involved greater risks. Something like it had however worked well in France and in this country during the Referendum Campaign in debate between Mr Benn and Mr Jenkins and Mrs Williams and Mr Powell.

Lord Thorneycroft suggested that something more like the second format would be more acceptable to the British public.

These alternatives had not so far been put to Mr Callaghan and Mr Trethowan had no idea what he would want.

Mr Trethowan concluded by saying that he would like to brood on this discussion. If a televised debate would be bad for British politics he would rather drop the idea.

ATH/SO
10th August 1978