TV detaks

Conservative and Unionist Central Office

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Chairman of the Party: THE RT HON THE LORD THORNEY CROFT

Deputy Chairmen: ANGUS MAUDE TO MP Vice Chairmen: REGINALD EYRE MP
THE BARONESS YOUNG GEOFFREY FINSBERG

GEOFFREY FINSBERG MBE JP MP

MARCUS FOX MBE MP JOHN MOORE MP

AH/SC

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

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TELEVISED DEBATES BETWEEN THE PARTY LEADERS DURING THE GENERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Minutes of a discussion held at Central Office at 4.30 p.m. on August 8th, 1978.

Present:

Lord Thorneycroft Mr Ian Trethowan

Mr Peter Hardiman Scott

Mr John Lindsey Mr Alan Howarth

Mr Trethowan and Mr Hardiman Scott had come to see Lord Thorneycroft following Mrs Thatcher's suggestion that they should do so.

Mr Trethowan explained that his proposals should be taken as joint proposals from the BBC and ITV. Although ITV were not formally involved (one ITV company had failed to agree) he had kept Sir Brian Young informed and he would envisage any programme being broadcast on all channels.

Lord Thorneycroft asked about the attitude of the minor Parties.

Mr Trethowan explained that the subject had been touched on at the meeting of the Committee on Party Political Broadcasts on 18th July.

The Scottish and Welsh Nationalists had not intervened, but the Liberals had expressed concern about their own position. There had not however been any adequate discussion so far with the minor Parties.

Mr Trethowan said he could write to them, but he thought it likely that the Liberals would object to the principle of a debate between the Leaders of the major Parties only and would want involvement. If the agreement of the other Parties to a debate as proposed was a precondition of Conservative willingness to participate then the whole idea had better be abandoned.

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 Fowell.

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