

The leader's debate: it was not a good night for poli...

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I am normally reluctant to think about politics later in the evening. I start the day with it. I try to close without it, but I made an exception for last night's TV debate between Rishi Sunak and Kier Starmer. I almost wish that I had not.

I am aware from this morning's newspapers that an opinion pole taken after the debate suggest that Sunak won, but with a margin of 51% to 49%, meaning that the difference is insignificant.

In my opinion it would be better to describe the result as a dull score draw in which neither side showed any flare, with negative tactics prevailing throughout.

That said, given how far Sunak is behind in the polls, this outcome will be seized upon by his supporters and overall I think it fair to say that the evening exposed just how weak Starmer's position is.

Sunak might have talked nonsense about the NHS, taxation, migration, housing and much more. But then, nothing more was expected of him. After all, after 14 dismal years in office, the Tories have nothing to brag about. Starmer was right, eventually, to note that Sunak sounded much more like an opposition leader, talking only about what might happen in the future, than a Prime Minister seeking to defend his record. But, like everything else that Starmer did, it took him a long time to make the point, and in many cases he simply failed to deliver what was very obviously necessary.

Sunak must, for example, have not believed his luck when on the first couple of occasions that he raised the entirely false allegation that Labour has plans to increase taxation by £2,000 per household Starmer failed to respond in any effective way. Worse, and given the low level of economic competence on display, Starmer also failed to challenge Sunak in response on his 'unfunded' plan to abolish national insurance until long after he should have done. As a consequence, in this critical area, Starmer looked way out of his depth.

The same was also true when it came to Sunak's allegation that Starmer would tax pensioners. Rather than simply dismiss this claim, which Starmer could've done - by saying that Labour would reintroduce the higher personal allowance for all old age pensioners, for example - he handed the whole issue on a plate to Sunak.

Elsewhere, Starmer was equality unconvincing. He had no solution for the junior doctor's paid dispute, and he will need one.

He was also unconvincing on migration, not that Sunak was any better. In fact Sunak seemed to have nothing to say at all of any consequence.

But, to continue the footballing metaphor, when neither leader revealed any ability to think constructively on their feet, let alone in front of the goalmouth, all that was noticed was their niggling, and rather grubby defence of their small-minded positions.

In the circumstances, Starmer came off worse because opinion polls suggested more might have been expected of him when Sunak has already very obviously been written off by the public. Against that expectation, and given that he should have been well aware of the terms of the debate, Starmer failed.

One final point. Neither party leader seemed able to make a point in 45 seconds. Both, arrogantly, tried to claim more time. Each spoke over the other. They deliberately ignored instructions from the chair. They both appeared quite unable to accept the rules of this exchange. The result was that they both looked like ill-prepared, petulant and unprepossessing failures.

It was not a good night for politics.