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Question Time: serious political debate or a popularity contest for needy egos?

January 30, 2015 12.54pm GMT



Question Time from Margaret Thatcher's old stomping ground of Finchley in north London. Ian West/PA Wire

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The BBC's long-running political panel show, **Question Time** sets out to be topical, relevant to its audience and spiced with a dash of controversy. So, as you'd expect, when it was broadcast from Wrexham, producers brought in Peter Hain and Plaid Cymru MP, Rhun ap Iorwerth, to provide the Welsh flavour with arts and culture minister Sajid Javid added to give us the government's point-of-view. And – always a good bet for a dash of controversy – we had Germaine Greer celebrating her 76th birthday. Making up the numbers was Telegraph blogger Kate Maltby – although what she was drafted in to provide was not clear.

But controversy is a modus operandi for QT, and the news that the pugnacious pro- Palestinian Respect MP, George Galloway, has been approached to be a guest on the February 5 programme to be broadcast from Finchley brought forth a perhaps predictable outcry.

The Jewish Chronicle highlighted Galloway's refusal to debate with Israelis and the fact that Finchley was home to the UK's largest Jewish population. Local MP, Mike Freer, was quoted as saying the BBC's decision was "deliberately provocative".

The BBC can't have done it by accident. Given what's going on in the world it is a slap in the face for the local community. It lacks sensitivity.

Also pencilled in for the show is the shy and retiring Janet Street Porter. Sparks, as they say, may fly.

On one level, Galloway's appearance, if it takes place, will hardly be a surprise. He has appeared on the programme six times since 2010. On two separate occasions he has appeared with the other habitual raisers of hackles, Nigel Farage (a whopping 13 appearances since 2010) and David Starkey (also six).

It is Starkey, actually, whose recent appearances have garnered the most publicity. When he and Galloway appeared together in February 2014, it was the historian who hit the headlines when he volunteered the view that that violence, not consent, should be the measure of rape.

In 2012, Starkey brusquely told an audience member that if he couldn't recognise propaganda from fact he "shouldn't be at a programme like this". And, just two weeks ago, in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo massacre, he accused Islam of being "backward" and referred to Mehdi Hassan, political director of the Huffington Post, as Ahmed.

In fact, there was a point early on in this edition when Starkey's boorish approach to debate threatened to reduce the proceedings to farce. Each guest appeared to shout over each other while the increasingly visibly tired David Dimbleby struggled to maintain control.

It occurred to me then that all this resembled nothing more than a diluted imitation of Prime Minister's Question Time, which is, as a matter of tradition, a weekly reminder of how base and degraded British democracy can be. Speaker John Bercow's estimation of PMQ's as a "litany of attacks, sound bites and planted questions" seemed a pathetically apposite description of what I was watching.

Scientists need not apply

There have been many who have called for an end to the programme which was first broadcast in 1979 and originally chaired by Robin Day. Lloyd Evans, in the Spectator in 2013, wrote that it was no longer the honest debating chamber that it once was, but rather an "unseemly gold-rush for applause" where "the panellists were a set of needy egos" and the audience, "composed of wonks and party activists posing as disinterested voters".

Science writer Martin Robbins put it beautifully in an article in *The Guardian* which was helpfully accompanied by a graph illustrating that stars from *The Apprentice* and *Dragons' Den* have made more appearances on Question Time than “all the scientists in the world put together”. Robbins wrote that Question Time was failure when it came to providing informed debate.

The bulk of panelists are drawn from the same upper-middle-class, upper-middle-aged pot of journalists, lawyers and politicians, and are often profoundly ignorant on topics outside of that narrow culture. Science, sex, the internet ... attempts to tackle anything outside their world result in bewildering exchanges that confuse more often than they inform.

Question Time has currency because it is the most watched political programme on British television and, as Phil Burton Cartledge points out, an appearance on the show by a politician or a commentator is a signal that they should be taken seriously.

But how long will that continue to be the case? The problem is that the programme should be about debate and information but it descends all too often into travesty. This is due largely to the ambition of a few notorious guests who are routinely asked to appear. Being controversial, difficult or rude seems to guarantee a return ticket. This, obviously, means serious discussion is not necessarily the main objective.

That's entertainment

It should be acknowledged that for all the criticism, it appears that the audience much prefers the verbal jousting a “Starkey versus Galloway” bout is guaranteed to provide.

The much-trumpeted appearance of Nigel Farage and Russell Brand on the same show in December led to a huge increase in viewing figures. That show reportedly had an extra million viewers more than the previous week. It rated as that particular Thursday's second-highest watched show with 3.4m people sitting down to watch.

It is certainly true (to an extent) that both Brand and Farage have altered the political landscape and that their populist approach is proving to be immensely attractive. That is why they appear on the programme. The question is whether this is to be celebrated in an age where the newspaper-reading, web-surfing public are more inclined to be more interested in who is sleeping with whom?

A study by academics at the University of Bristol's Intelligent Systems Laboratory analysed the choices made by readers of online news and found, according to lead researcher Professor Nello Cristianini:

Significant inverse correlations between the appeal to users and the amount of attention devoted to public affairs. People are put off by public affairs and attracted by entertainment, crime, and other non-public affairs topics.

Maybe Question Time, despite its more than occasional forays into farce and drama, still has validity as a medium which draws in viewers who would normally eschew political programming?

Whatever your view, Question Time in 2015 is far removed from its staid three-party roots of 1979. But then so is the UK. The producers of the programme have tried to embrace modernity with the acknowledgement of celebrity culture and the adoption of social media – viewers can now text or tweet while watching, using the red button on the remote to access a selection of comments which run along the bottom of the screen.

Let's not forget also that it is one of the very few programmes which allows politicians to be directly addressed by the electorate. It has its faults quite obviously and the observations of Martin Robbins are persuasive, but for all that I say we should be glad it still exists.

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