

Question Time: Corbyn falls for May's traps on spending plans, national security

The Labour and Conservative leaders gave diminished performances as they faced the York audience



By Finn Judge, Editor (2017)
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Image: BBC

Tonight's leaders special of Question Time, filmed live at the Ron Cooke Hub on Heslington East, saw both party leaders deliver a struggled performance as they faced a panel of voters. While Theresa May struggled to defend her record of U-turns on social care and Brexit tactics, Jeremy Corbyn failed to convince the panel that he was strong on national security and soundly financing his policies.

Prime Minister Theresa May was up first on the show. She got off to a tricky start with the first question coming from the University's Chair of the UKIP Association, Abigail Eatock, who listed the Prime Minister's changes of heart on Brexit, calling the election, and social care. Clearly uncomfortable with the set tone, the Prime Minister's body language seized and narrowed as she winced her way through justifying why her appearance tonight was sufficient to argue that she was strong enough to take on the issues of this General Election.

"I just got the sense that most people in the audience were angry," Eatock commented, speaking to *Nouse* after the show. "There were a lot of people who said harsher things than I did, and I think May did terribly with the other questions. I think Jeremy Corbyn's got a real chance of winning now - especially if you look at the polls."

Such sentiments did not deter May from preempting much of Corbyn's platform. Invoking the issues of economic credibility and national security as the two most important issues, the Prime Minister claimed that Labour believed in a "magic money tree" from which all their spending promises were sourced, while

citing the "tough decisions" that the Conservatives had to make from 2010 to 'live within our means'. Further to this, she denounced Labour as a threat to national security, with Diane Abbott's support for wiping out the DNA database of criminals and terrorists being raised by May to the audience.

Despite these attempts to taint Corbyn's turn, many commentators in the spin room conceded that the Labour leader got off to a strong start. Gliding effortlessly through questions on Brexit, he made the case for a more cooperative engagement with the EU for negotiating Britain's withdrawal, emphasising that he wanted to retain the benefits of single market access. This, alongside his emphasis on Labour's manifesto being fully costed, gave him an initial appearance of governing competence.

However, true to May's strategy, it was later on the issues of Trident that caused Corbyn to fall well short of the mark. Although he repeatedly ruled out the 'first use' of nuclear weapons, so as to imply the manifesto's support for Trident was to have it as a retaliatory force, he failed to deny that he would not be willing to use them under any circumstance.

"Any circumstances where anyone is prepared to use a nuclear weapon is disastrous for whole planet," Corbyn stated. He went on to explain that, by building relationships with other nuclear states, his policy would be that of encouraging multilateral disarmament - but the audience remained unconvinced, and continued to press him on the issue several times.

After a series of awkward exchanges regarding the Labour leader's personal stance on nuclear weapons, the issue of economic competence was on the agenda again - and not in a favourable way for Corbyn. An audience member, unconvinced by the costings of Labour's policies, derided his manifesto as a "little red book" of an unrealistic wish list. While the bulk of Corbyn's 44bn plan for extra spending come from hikes in corporation tax and income tax, he insisted that such rises would only be sourced from the top 5% of earners. However, the audience member in question was particularly concerned that business would flee the country due to this.

It is believed that the Conservatives will 'spin' Corbyn's apparent weaknesses on national security and economic credibility, aiming to entice swing voters to vote for Theresa May on the basis of competence. Speaking to *Nouse*, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson described Corbyn's reluctance to deploy a nuclear deterrent as "worrying for our allies" - adding that the Labour leader "spoke in a verbose manner, and is clearly not a negotiator." One can foresee that such a message may resonate with voters' concerns about Brexit and foreign relations going forward.

Going by audience reaction, however, Corbyn was the real victor, gaining far more applause for an extended period than the Prime Minister. Although BBC audiences have come under fire of late for reportedly having a 'left-wing bias', the broadcasting corporation screened audience members tonight on the basis that an equal amount of May and Corbyn supporters would be present on the night.



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