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Salmond vs Darling debate: the perceived winner is not what matters

August 26, 2014 1.41pm BST

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To work out who won the debates between Alex Salmond and Alistair Darling, you have to ask the audience. The trouble is that different audiences will tell you different things.

If you asked the studio audience, judging by the boos and cheers, they'd say that Darling won the first round and Salmond the second – a point reinforced by most of the media coverage. I think this says much more about the bias of the audiences, and their participation in the debate, than Salmond and Darling. (At key points, incidentally, the audience seemed more important than the politicians on stage - thus bringing to life Schattschneider's famous thought experiment).

Salmond and Darling were making very similar points in both debates. In the first, Salmond was uncomfortable and seemed defensive when pressed to reveal his currency "Plan B". This time, he was self-assured when presenting "three Plan Bs". In the first debate, the

currency argument was working great for Darling. This time, you could hear people ridiculing him when he tried to press the point home. This seemed to make a difference, giving Salmond the confidence to make a further claim, which might have faced an audible backlash in the first debate: if we don't get our share of the Bank of England's assets, we can't be expected to share the UK's debts.

Darling often seemed defensive or repetitive, and lost his cool enough to break ranks from Better Together to stress his Labour credentials – which he is entitled to do, but it suggests an uneasy temporary alliance with his Conservative and Liberal Democrat colleagues. He also seemed unable to adapt quickly enough to Salmond's surprisingly subtle and relatively soft concern about the future of the Scottish NHS – a topic which has proved important enough to knock the currency issue off the front pages.

In the lead-up to the debate, Better Together's argument was about the Yes campaign's "scaremongering" and "lies" around the claim that privatisation of the English NHS would reduce spending on the Scottish NHS; it might oblige Scotland to follow the same path; and, only a written Scottish constitution could guarantee a public health service. Yet Salmond merely said that, in the future, the UK government *might* start charging fees and spend less on the NHS, which could have a knock-on effect for the Scottish budget (even if the health secretary went a bit further in the Scottish parliament). I think this wrong-footed Darling, who seemed determined to identify the Yes campaign's scaremongering regardless.

If you asked the "snap poll" audience, you would get the same answer as the studio audience: Darling won the first round (56% agree, if you remove don't knows) and Salmond the second (71%). Note that, of course, your response very much depends on who you already support. Note also that it is difficult to avoid the manly punch-up metaphor, which seems appropriate, given how long Salmond and Darling engaged in some entertaining/off-putting verbal sparring.

But right now, the only audience that matters is the voting public. Remember that, in the first debate, a Darling "win" produced either the same opinion poll results or a slight bump for Yes in a small number of polls – not the result you might have predicted. This time, Salmond's win had no immediate impact on the vote. My instinct is that it will stay that way. But we won't know if there has been an effect, if any, until we wait for people to read and think about the debate and its coverage over the next few days and weeks.



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