

Anti-climax? In the debate, nobody hit a pitfall, nobody rose to the occasion

By Conrad Black

The Trump-Harris debate on Tuesday night was something of an anti-climax. Neither was in cracking form but both avoided the pitfalls that their supporters feared they might not surmount. The vice president was fluent though she spoke with the unspontaneous lack of conviction of an autocue. She ignored many of the questions put to her and instead delivered canned responses to matters about which no curiosity had been expressed. The moderators were highly partisan in her favour and made no effort to pursue her in her evasiveness, while they diligently pettifogged and snapped at Trump's ankles. Harris's supporters would have been relieved that she did not inflict the customarily almost incomprehensible word salad of her unscripted conversation.



Was that all you two could deliver? Debate was uneventful, with no blunders or winning arguments (Photo by Win McNamee/Getty Images)

But Harris completely failed to score on any of Trump's supposed vulnerabilities: he de-fanged the abortion question, left her no room at all to accuse him of extremism or undemocratic tendencies, and when she raised the complaints that a number of his former colleagues in his administration had spoken against him, he pointed out that in every case he had fired them for incompetence and that that was the normal response of people finding themselves in that state of unemployment.

Trump tied Harris hand-and-foot to Biden and gave their administration a thorough pasting, never failing to add to his assertion (that may be accurate), that Biden has been the worst president in the country's history, that she was also the worst vice president, (difficult to prove since it is an office with such nebulous responsibilities).

Harris's effort to make anything of the criminal charges against Trump was completely unsuccessful and he did better pointing out what a menace to democracy the Democrats' abuse of the justice system has been. She was unable to defend any aspect of the economic record or foreign policy bungling of the administration where she has supposedly been the co-pilot, but, as frequently occurs, Trump went a little overboard both in the vehemence of his disparagements and the frequency of their repetition.

Trump hammered very hard on the open border and the millions upon millions of illegal migrants but became a bit tiresome in variations on the theme that the poorest countries in the world emptied their jails and insane asylums and reduced their crime rates by shipping desperate masses on their teeming shores across the Rio Grande into America. The strongest single gambit of the night was at the end when Trump asked why, if the vice president was so suffused with joy and hope for the wonderful things she would accomplish, she and the president whom she served had failed to achieve any of the men the last three and a half years.

Although he did not do so explicitly, he clearly made it very awkward for Harris to straddle between her imputations of gangsterism and reaction against Trump with her steady move toward him in many policy areas, and her failure to distance herself from Biden or to put up any serious defence for the performance of what for campaign purposes is now generally referred to as the Biden-Harris administration.

Guessing how the American voting public will respond to anything is always challenging and it is likely that a large number of viewers would have regarded the exchange as rather uneventful with no colossal blunder or tremendous winning argument. It wasn't very entertaining, always an important aspect of American public affairs.

The vice president, although she bursts into uncontrollable laughter rather easily, has never been known to say anything very amusing, while Trump, whose comedic talents are legendary and frequently uproarious, did manage four or five genuine witticisms. Most commentators seem to think that both were able to avoid disaster and that he won the battle for who is most likely to be an agent of change. This was thought to be the chief object, given that approximately 70 per cent of Americans think the country is going in the wrong direction.

Trump launched many unanswerable attacks on Biden policies and made several withering assaults upon the apparent corruption of the Biden family which, while they did not implicate the vice president personally, and there is no reason to imagine she had anything to do with their more avaricious activities, could not have failed to be somewhat damaging to her. No American administration in living memory after the recent criminal guilty pleas of the incumbent president's son has been so vulnerable to that kind of argument, and the vice president did not raise a peep of dissent or utter a word of defence.

Both sides are claiming victory and neither suffered a serious

setback and it is unlikely that the needle of public opinion, which appears to show Trump maintaining a narrow lead, will move very much. Considering what is at stake, neither candidate may claim to have risen to the occasion. It wasn't Lincoln and Douglas, nor even Nixon and Kennedy, but it was not a shouting match nor slapstick farce either. Given the burdens she was under, the vice president probably came closer to doing as well as she could than her opponent, but because of the shortcomings of the outgoing administration, Trump probably narrowly won the debate.

First published in the [Brussel's Signal](#)