

Shorten wins first debate

Written by The Conversation USA

The first debate of the election campaign, a “people’s forum” of 100 undecided voters in western Sydney that was a relatively free-flowing affair, saw Bill Shorten come out ahead.

After the encounter, 42 of the audience said they were more likely to vote for Shorten as a result of what they’d heard, 29 were more persuaded by Turnbull and 29 were undecided.

While everyone was polite this was an unpredictable environment for the contenders. The questions weren’t known even to Sky, which hosted the night. Turnbull and Shorten did not just have to be well prepared but also quick on their feet, to come back with responses to each other and to deal with some persistent follow ups from moderator David Speers.

Shorten had previously done 25 of these forums and was comfortable in the setting. One of the questioners said later that Shorten seemed to be “talking more from the heart” while Turnbull was a “bit more standoffish”.

The Opposition Leader had good reflexes. When Turnbull was expounded on the government’s child care policy, he leapt in to point out that its implementation had just been delayed by a year, to 2018.

Not surprisingly, given this was western Sydney, the dozen questions were easier for Shorten because most of them played to his agenda more than to Turnbull’s.

Questioners were concerned with health and education, business outsourcing overseas which cost jobs, superannuation - but not at the top end or the argument about retrospectivity - and whether there would be more privatisation.

Also notable was what didn’t get asked. Much of the election debate this week has concerned Labor’s asylum seeker policy, but boats did not rate a mention. Nor did climate change.

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Shorten came across as traditional Labor, focused on the importance of services. But he was also anxious at every opportunity to say how he'd pay for them. He stressed that decisions were about priorities.

He was blunt when pressed on privatisation, saying "the privatisation tide has probably gone too far". Turnbull said these days the issue was more of a live one at state level. When he was pushed on Australia Post and ASC Turnbull tended to faff around. Shorten jumped in to say that Australian Hearing should not be privatised.

Shorten came out ahead after a question about bank interest rates that quickly morphed into the issue of whether there should be a royal commission into the banks. Turnbull tried to be over-clever by referring to a Shorten article with the heading "Time to put the banks in the dock". The "dock", Turnbull pointed out, was where the criminal stood. The audience was obviously inclined to see the dock as a rather appropriate place for the banks.

Both leaders were firm in rejecting the proposition from one questioner that people should be able to access their superannuation for housing. Turnbull declared the purpose of superannuation was to provide for retirement; Shorten said "the nature of leadership" was that you couldn't always tell people what they wanted to hear.

In the course of the forum both leaders produced some news on health policy. Turnbull announced the government had just settled its dispute with pathologists, who will continue to bulk bill for blood tests and the like.

The government decided late last year that from July 1 bulk billing incentives paid to providers would be taken away. The deal struck with Pathology Australia, which represent the pathology companies, will reduce their rents in collection centres, rather than restore the bulk billing incentive.

For his part Shorten, who has yet to unveil Labor's health policy, indicated it would modify the government's freeze on the Medicare patient rebate, which currently extends to 2020. The freeze, which affects most doctors, has been trenchantly attacked by the medical lobby, with an Australian Medical Association campaign due to start on Sunday.

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People's forums have only been going in recent elections. They are valuable because they get away from the controlled nature of many campaign events. It's not yet clear how many debates there will be, but let's hope there will be more of these forums, which give a chance for community engagement. They should however be broadcast on free-to-air TV, so they can be seen by a much wider audience.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/shorten-wins-first-debate-59418>