Sunday night’s leaders debate was a disappointment. Malcolm Turnbull and Bill Shorten were over-rehearsed; the content was old ground; the spontaneity was minimal. When a question was too hard they simply defaulted to another script of their choice.

For Turnbull and Shorten this was an ordeal that had to be endured, with its risks and dangers avoided as best they could.

While the “people’s forum” at which the leaders appeared at the start of the campaign threw up less intellectual questions, at least there was more interaction between the leaders and greater unpredictability. In contrast, the National Press Club face-off lacked spark and, despite the best efforts of moderator Chris Ulhmann and the journalists' panel, they managed to get away with a lot.

In their opening statements both talked “plans” – Shorten has now adopted the term “plan”, which presumably goes down well in focus groups. Their themes were familiar – jobs and growth from Turnbull; fairness, education and the like from Shorten.

Turnbull assumed a loftier pitch; Shorten aimed more directly at ordinary people.

Condemning the government’s proposed business tax cuts, Shorten highlighted that the banks would get them, a point to which he later returned; he brought in Reagan and Thatcher to reinforce his case that Turnbull was embarking on a “very risky expensive gamble” with taxpayers' money “for little economic benefit”.

When Turnbull was asked, in essence, where the old Malcolm had gone since last September the Prime Minister meandered off to talk about his business career and wife Lucy. There were a couple of mentions of the popular Lucy from him during the debate.

Brought back to the question, Turnbull defended his position on climate change, saying where he stands now is where he has always stood, which is, at best, something of a stretch, given he was once a vigorous supporter of an emissions trading scheme.

Offered the opportunity to talk about who he is, Bill Shorten said he was “a person who stood up for a fair go my whole working life”.

When asked how people could trust them when they’d deposed sitting prime ministers, neither wanted to dwell on such nasty history. Shorten said “Labor’s learnt its lesson from that difficult period" while Turnbull simply ignored the substance of the question. Brought back to the matter of trust, and told that the people of Australia wanted an answer, he declared he was a “well known quantity in Australian public life” and “I came into this role as an adult. At 50. After a lifetime of working, building businesses”.

In response to a question about medium-term health and education funding, Turnbull argued that Labor had no plan for economic growth, which has been indeed a weak point in the opposition’s case.

Shorten said Turnbull had the mother of all spending plans, with his $50 billion corporate tax cut. “Mr Turnbull wants to spend taxpayers' money – he just doesn’t want to spend it on most taxpayers.”

Turnbull once again invoked his business background to defend his tax cut, saying he understood “how business operates”, and “how companies make investment decisions”. He pointed out Paul Keating had reduced company tax.

Shorten retorted that it was the “same old Liberals – just give tax cuts to the top end of town and let the rest of the people make do with not much at all”, and he referenced the banks again.

Neither Turnbull nor Shorten would concede the other would have a mandate to get their key policies through if they won, though Shorten said he’d expect Turnbull would push through his tax plan.

When it came to the future of the people on Nauru and Manus, “plans” were notably absent. Shorten wanted to stick close to the government on deterring people smugglers but would send a minister for talks with the UNHCR. Turnbull claimed – although he was not asked for the evidence – that the people smugglers were “out there marketing now, telling their customers that if Labor is elected it will be all on again”. Shorten hit back with: “Shame on you for giving the people smugglers any hope they could be back in business”. Shame does not come easily to the government on this subject.

When the discussion returned to climate change, Turnbull noted he had once “paid a high price for my commitment to that issue” but Shorten quickly twisted the knife: “You were so impressive when you were leading on climate change. Now you’re just implementing Tony Abbott’s policies.”

Though it was hardly a surprise, both men did a disservice by resorting to scares and simplistic attacks during their encounter. That Turnbull is just going back to the Labor-will-let-the-boats-come line, and not saying what he plans to do about Manus and Nauru is a moral disgrace – but a political convenience. That Shorten invokes the banks at every opportunity - “[Turnbull] wants to give them a tax cut, I want to give them a royal commission” – is cheap populism, even if he is right about the need for a royal commission.

Turnbull came across as having an “I know best, because I’ve been in business” attitude, Shorten – who had some snappy lines - as determined to appeal to the ordinary Joe Blow, even if that means pushing a program that is weak at its economic core.

For many people Sunday’s performances would mainly reinforce what they thought already.

Who won? In a campaign where voter disengagement is still high, I think both leaders failed to engage properly with the occasion or the public.

Read more http://theconversation.com/both-leaders-failed-to-engage-properly-with-the-occasion-or-the-public-60161