

Shorten and Morrison make their final cases in third leaders' debate: our experts respond

Written by Chris Salisbury, Research Associate, School of Political Science & International Studies, The University of Queensland

Bill Shorten and Scott Morrison were given the chance to ask each other questions in Wednesday night's third and final leaders' debate in the election campaign. Fortunately, the leaders stuck to policy and left their [mothers](#) out of it (for the most part).

But the relative decorum was short-lived. The final few minutes saw the leaders bicker over their respective cabinets, with Morrison pressing Shorten to name his home affairs minister and Shorten questioning why so many of the Coalition's ministers were leaving their posts.

"No need to get nasty," Morrison said, before trying to laugh off the exchange as a joke.

As we're nearing the end of what has been, at times, a caustic campaign, which candidate made the best case to the Australian people in the final debate? Our experts give their take:

Andrew Dodd, Director of the Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

We all know the limitations and frustrations of political debate in our news media. It so often descends into partisan sloganeering and obfuscation that most of us are extremely wary of engaging with it.

And that's what the final leaders' debate looked like at the outset, when Prime Minister Scott Morrison responded to moderator Sabra Lane's opening question about the asylum seekers still on Manus Island and Nauru.

It was a great question, about the times both leaders have opted to do what's right, despite their actions being unpopular. Morrison turned it into a spiel about boat turn-backs. It was all sounding a bit blah, blah, blah-ish until Opposition Leader Bill Shorten responded by revealing how he had convinced others in the Labor caucus that they had no choice but to accept the necessity of turning back refugees at sea.

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It was a precious moment, when we saw the real dynamics of party politics more clearly. And, as it happens just one of several reasons why the final debate was worth watching.

It happened again when Shorten asked whether the Coalition would reduce “out of pocket” expenses for cancer treatments. As he did, the smirk on Morrison’s face slowly evaporated. Clearly this was not a topic to look glib about.

The prime minister replied with the assertion that all public patients receive free cancer treatment, and as the audience stirred at that contestable idea, he quickly steered his answer towards the much safer territory of his party’s commitment to protect current rebates for private health insurance.

His supporters in the audience (who sounded more vociferous) applauded on cue, but the issue was left unresolved. The conversation had descended into typical partisan discourse. It was more about heat than light. But as Lane tried to move on to another topic, Shorten piped up with an unscheduled question: “Is that a yes or a no?” he asked.

What followed was an actual contest of ideas, where the leaders tried to tease out the inconsistencies in the detail of the other party’s policy. In the process, their underlying philosophical differences emerged.

The debate ranged across the now-familiar topics of dividends, negative gearing, house prices, renewables, climate change and childcare. But then, up came the question about Israel Folau and his homophobic comments. A more loaded topic is hard to imagine as it balances the competing concepts of religious freedom, freedom of speech and protecting people from hateful commentary.

Morrison said all the right things, although the answer momentarily went awry as he added – almost as an afterthought – that he also respected non-believers. Shorten confessed he felt “uneasy” about Folau losing his employment because he’d expressed his views, while also sympathising with those he offended.

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It was all about nuance, something Shorten has returned to several times during the campaign – the assertion that complex ideas shouldn't be reduced to just right and wrong or black and white.

And in that spirit, nor should debates always be assessed as won by one and lost by another. Especially when what emerged was a healthy and robust discussion about quite stark choices for the future of the country, all conducted in a civil and good-hearted manner.

Read more: [*View from The Hill: Shorten had the content, Morrison had the energy in first debate*](#)

Marian Sawer, Emeritus Professor, School of Politics and International Relations, Australian National University

Has the time passed for the kind of leaders' debate we have just viewed at the National Press Club?

Predictable questions were answered by the leaders in predictable ways with predictable applause from their sides of the audience. The prime minister repeating the well-worn theme of being "better at managing the economy" and "keeping Australians safe" and relying on the spectre of Labor "going after your money through taxes". Opposition Leader Bill Shorten being more cogent on climate change policy and adept at explaining Labor's proposed tax reforms (he's certainly had enough practice at this).

The kind of well-worn questions and responses seen here tell us little about the ideology underlying Scott Morrison's view of taxes. Instead, taxes are weaponised in this kind of market populism and never presented as an instrument of social justice or the means of civilising capitalism.

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Nor do the questions asked tell us much about the whole range of policies that might improve the lives of Australians. [Q&A on Monday](#) generated much more interesting questions, even including a voice for Indigenous Australians and issues around the systemic undervaluing of work in the care sector of the economy.

The gender effects of the policy divide between the Coalition and Labor were also scarcely touched upon. These include the effects of tax policies in exacerbating gender gaps, with the cuts to pay for them disproportionately affecting women. Women are notoriously disadvantaged by small government policies, being more dependent on public expenditure for employment and services.

Shorten did touch lightly on his wish for gender pay equity for his daughter. If given a chance he could have made something of Labor's policy commitments to ensure that budgetary decisions like those on tax are properly analysed for their effects on gender equality.

So many missed opportunities, largely the result of a tired template and lack of interaction with the audience. Even a rolling, on-screen Twitter feed (like the one used on Q&A) would have livened things up for viewers.

There must be ways that social media can be used to make leaders' debates a more interactive experience. This is the digital era, after all, and politics is done differently there.

Read more: [**Up close and personal: Morrison and Shorten get punchy in the second leaders' debate. Our experts respond.**](#)

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For the final leaders' debate, the National Press Club provided a more stately, formalised setting than Brisbane's town hall-style meeting, with the leaders here static but engaging willingly in head-to-head questioning and, almost throughout, civil debating.

Little new ground was covered tonight; rather, the priority was consolidating messages that have by now become familiar to most voters. Differences were broached in their parties' approaches to taxation, superannuation, housing affordability, health care and energy costs.

Asked about their willingness to make difficult, unpopular decisions, Scott Morrison harked back to his time as immigration minister "stopping boats and securing borders". His "tough" budget calls as treasurer also received an outing.

Bill Shorten maybe pre-empted a line of attack and spoke early on about his background as a union representative and, surprisingly perhaps, his role in deciding his party's stance on boat turn-backs.

Both leaders looked to position themselves as fit for leadership: Morrison stressing a readiness to be tough when needed and a commitment to a "well-managed economy"; Shorten making a positive out of his long "apprenticeship" as opposition leader and his party's stability.

When challenged about the damage that revolving-door prime ministers in both major parties had inflicted on the body politic, Shorten cheekily suggested one more change was needed yet. Both leaders pointed to changed party rules ensuring the next prime minister would serve a full term.

Tellingly, though, Shorten pivoted to nominate climate change as a "real fault line" in the Liberal party that would see instability remain in a Coalition government.

Morrison offered calm – if doubtful – assurances that his party was "agreed" on the need for climate policy action. There was a less convincing defence against Shorten's assertions of preference deals and candidate selection showing the Coalition's flirting with the "extreme right".

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In their last statements, styled to make a case for leading the country, Morrison highlighted his desire for a strong economy to secure Australians' futures. For his part, Shorten emphasised fairer equity in wages, as well as offering "hope" and equality for future generations.

Both leaders made sure as the debate neared its end to remind viewers of their well-worn barbs and slogans lambasting the other side – quips about each other's future ministerial appointments afforded one of the few lighter, if still awkward, moments.

But with record numbers of pre-poll votes already cast, an unspoken question hung over much of the evening's jousting – who's still listening at this late stage?

Dr Chris Salisbury is affiliated with Queensland's TJ Ryan Foundation.

Marian Sawer receives funding from ARC for the Democratic Audit of Australia

Andrew Dodd does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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