

Cameron rules out TV election debate over fears Labour would win the election

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Ed Miliband and David Cameron

David Cameron has finally ruled out taking part in a head-to-head election debate with Ed Miliband, amid Conservative fears that the contest could give a boost to the Labour leader in the final days of the [election campaign](#).

The prime minister made a “final offer” to broadcasters on Wednesday night, saying he was prepared only to take part in one 90-minute debate: a televised event with six other party leaders. In a further attempt to minimise potential risk from the contest, Mr Cameron said he would only take part if the one-off debate took place before the end of March — before the start of the campaign proper.

Mr Cameron’s decision to take part only on his terms reflects the view of Lynton Crosby, the Tory campaign chief, that there is no potential gain for the prime minister in sharing a platform with Mr Miliband.

Mr Crosby has sanctioned a single multi-headed debate including the Greens, Ukip and Plaid Cymru in an attempt to bolster Tory claims that the election could result in “chaos”, with smaller parties holding the balance of power.

Douglas Alexander, chair of Labour’s election campaign, described the Conservatives’ final offer as “an outrageous attempt from the prime minister to bully the broadcasters into dropping their proposals for a head-to-head debate”.

Mr Alexander added: “That it comes only hours after Ed Miliband called David Cameron’s bluff and said he would debate him any time, any place, shows the lengths David Cameron will go to run scared of a debate with Ed Miliband.

“We continue to support the broadcasters proposals, including for seven-way debates alongside a two-way debate with David Cameron.”

Labour MPs had earlier mocked Mr Cameron in the Commons with chicken noises, with Mr Miliband saying the prime minister wanted to “scupper” negotiations with broadcasters and “sink the debates”.

Tory strategists calculate that Mr Miliband's public standing is so low he would almost certainly benefit from the exposure of a television debate.

Sky News and Channel 4, which were seeking to host a two-way debate on the proposed date of April 30, had said they were prepared to hold the contest on a different date acceptable to both leaders.

But Downing Street finally decided to end the wrangling with broadcasters late on Wednesday night, admitting that Mr Cameron did not want to go head-to-head with Mr Miliband under any circumstances.

In a letter written by Craig Oliver, Mr Cameron's press chief, Number 10 tried to blame the broadcasters for their handling of the negotiations on debates.

"This is our final offer and, to be clear, given the fact this has been a deeply unsatisfactory process and we are within a month of the short campaign, the prime minister will not be participating in more than one debate," Mr Oliver wrote.

Mr Cameron's insistence that any seven-way debate should take place in March reflects his contention that the debates "suck the life out of the campaign".

But it is also a defensive mechanism. Mr Cameron was widely criticised by some in his party for agreeing to take part in television debates with Gordon Brown in 2010; the Tory leader underperformed, especially in the first debate, giving a lift to Mr Brown and, in particular, to Nick Clegg, the Lib Dem leader.

"What's in it for us?" said one cabinet minister. Another senior Tory said: "Do you really think we're going to give Miliband the publicity of a two-way debate just before the election?"

In a joint statement, ITV, BBC, Sky and Channel 4 said they would "respond to the Conservatives' proposal in due course".

From their perspective, the good news is that Mr Cameron has at least agreed to do a debate — something to which he has previously refused to commit.

However, news providers are likely to be uneasy about allowing the prime minister to set the terms of the debate schedule. Mr Oliver's letter stands in stark contrast to the scenario in the US, where a bipartisan commission negotiates the terms of the presidential debates.

A 90-minute debate, as proposed by Mr Cameron, would work out as roughly 13 minutes per party — or less than the time available to each participant in an edition of BBC's *Question Time* programme.