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A shouty, unedifying spectacle and a narrow win for Albanese: 3 experts assess the second election debate

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Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese met in the second election debate on Sunday evening, before a panel of Nine Network journalists.

In the often fiery debate, the leaders answered questions about the cost of living, aged care, national security and a federal integrity commission, among other issues.

Here's how our expert panel rated their performances.

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Gregory Melleuish, Professor, School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, University of Wollongong

It was an odd time for an election debate, 8.45pm on a Sunday night – hardly a slot that would guarantee a large audience. It was a frustrating affair, not least because the app one downloaded to provide feedback didn't seem to work properly.

The format was better than that of the first debate, with no audience and questions from three interrogators that were often quite pointed, and which both Albanese and Morrison had to answer within a minute. This format, I think, did not work in Morrison's favour as he has a tendency to loquaciousness.

The response of both Morrison and Albanese was to attempt to be "on message". Morrison went on about how good his government was in economic affairs, blaming the current situation on external and international factors. Albanese focused on increasing wages, aged care and cost of living. He talked at length about "the plan", although it was unclear what this plan is.

At this stage, the whole thing seemed somewhat tedious, looking like a rerun of the first debate. One began to look at one's watch to see how long it would continue. Then the first elements of aggression began to emerge in the debate, with quite heated exchanges between Morrison and Albanese on what seemed to be technical matters of particular policies.

My sense was that Morrison was somewhat frustrated with the format and felt the need to assert himself, although Albanese was also quick to respond. One of my colleagues texted me that Morrison was now engaging in Trump-style tactics, but it seemed to me Morrison's aggression was not calculated, as is the case with Trump, but more borne out of frustration.

Then came the real highlight of the contest, when Albanese mentioned the Liberal government had sold the port of Darwin to a Chinese company. This inflamed Morrison and made him quite aggressive, perhaps an indication that he felt that Albanese had laid a very effective punch.

In this regard, I have to give the debate to Albanese on points. He stood up to Morrison and made his case quite effectively. He did not back down in any of the confrontations with Morrison.

Morrison, I feel, had problems with the debate because it restrained his natural marketing style and this lured him into being more aggressive than he might have wished to be.

One wonders whether either Morrison and Albanese have done themselves any good regarding how they are perceived by women. Sarah Abo did a courageous job trying to keep the two of them in line. But, as the debate became more heated, she experienced difficulties keeping them in check. Perhaps not a good look for the two leaders.

Verdict: Albanese, on points.



Sarah Abo did a courageous job trying to keep the two leaders in line. AAP Image/Pool, Alex Ellinghausen

Sana Nakata, Associate Professor in Political Science, University of Melbourne

The losers in this debate were the Australian public. At various moments in this debate, Morrison and Albanese shouted over each other in a manner unedifying and near impossible for the audience to follow.

While there were the expected questions on the cost of living, national security, corruption and aged care, there were three questions that stood out from the issues that have otherwise been preoccupying the daily election coverage.

The most interesting was about what's at stake for young people in this election, eliciting two different responses: social housing and the help-to-buy scheme from Albanese, and jobs from Morrison. It was surprising not to hear more on climate change from Albanese, given what a priority it is for young voters. An underwhelming response from Morrison, and a missed opportunity for Albanese.

The worst question (and responses) of the night was "How do you define a woman?" The question was terrible because it wasn't asked in order to clarify any specific policy, nor was it a question explicitly about Katherine Deves' campaign in Warringah.

Even worse, in the quick pivot to "women's issues", it was also not asked to take seriously trans peoples' lives and what's at stake for them and their families in this election. In the end, it came off as a question designed to create another "gotcha" moment for the pleasure of journalists, rather than to help the voting public decide which leader best represents their values and concerns.

It would also be remiss of me not to remark on what was not debated tonight – there was not a single question on First Nations policy, nor any reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in any response. This is as expected, but it is important to name what can and cannot be debated in front of the Australian public.

And it turns out trans lives and Black lives still don't matter.

Verdict: Albanese, by a slightly less shouty whisker.



At various moments in this debate, Morrison and Albanese shouted over each other. AAP Image/Pool, Alex Ellinghausen

Joshua Black, PhD Candidate, School of History, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University

"The Great Debate" was an unedifying spectacle emblematic of the election campaign more broadly.

There were several fraught and shouty exchanges between Morrison and Albanese, over energy prices, foreign policy, and the long-promised national integrity commission. Most sensationally, Morrison accused Albanese's deputy leader Richard Marles of kowtowing to China, a bald attempt at red-baiting and echoing his earlier claim Albanese was China's preferred candidate.

The panellists later claimed they enjoyed the "entertainment", but the refusal to uphold a semblance of decorum was to the detriment of both candidates.

At times, the pair shouted not only over one another, but over the moderator, Sarah Abo. Given the treatment of women in politics remains an issue of great import, the optics of the two men ignoring the younger woman moderator as they attacked one another were decidedly poor.

On a key issue, the debate did nothing other than reveal the lack of direct controls available to a federal government in the war against inflation. In an exchange about the price of lettuce, Nine political editor Chris Uhlmann prodded Morrison to accept the government had no direct control over prices. For his part, Albanese promised he would "try" to secure the "objective" of keeping wages above inflation. For all of the hollow rhetoric about "getting prices down", neither leader gave much cause for confidence given the Commonwealth's historic powerlessness over prices and incomes.

Much would be gained from observing this evening's debate with the sound off, not only because the rhetoric was so often evasive. Morrison is a voice actor. Without sound, his body language, and that of his opponent, told a markedly different story.

Albanese looked earnest but frustrated, determined to show strength and spirit but clearly exasperated at repeated efforts to skewer him. Morrison oscillated between a smug placidity and high-octane dominance of the space, smirking at some moments and gesticulating wildly at others.

In the end, Albanese might have narrowly won the contest, his doggedness prevailing against Morrison's hysteria and aggression. But after that shouting match, Nine Entertainment was the real winner, and the public the loser.

Verdict: Albanese, narrowly

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Gregory Melleuish
Professor, School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, University of Wollongong

Joshua Black
PhD Candidate, School of History, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University

Sana Nakata
Lecturer in Political Science & ARC Discovery Indigenous Research Fellow, The University of Melbourne

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