

Final SNP leadership hustings held in Edinburgh

Times Radio and The Times in Scotland hosted the final leadership debate in Edinburgh on Tuesday evening, the seventeenth such encounter over the past few weeks.

All three candidates answered the final round of questions in front of a live audience of more than 40 people, their last chance to persuade any last SNP member who has yet to vote, that they are the one to lead the party and the country. Questions of the process of the vote were in the background but not raised during the evening which dealt with many matters which have been discussed before. All three have only a few more days within which to attain the highest office, and most questions have already been asked.

We learned that Humza Yousaf had never had a deep fried Mars bar, Ash Regan used to sing in a band and Kate Forbes had a motorcycle licence before she passed her driving test in a car. Other than that it was a tried and tested format with mostly polite debate among the candidates.

Times Radio's Aasmah Mir presented the event interviewing each candidate and moderating questions from the audience drawn from across the political spectrum.



Topics covered included independence, the failed Gender Recognition Reform Bill, education but only in the context of children questioning their gender. There was nothing of any substance discussed about the government's transport policy, or what the candidates would do about the cost of living or energy. Nothing was asked about the apparent cancellation of First Minister's Questions until next month under accusations from Scottish Conservatives that it was a "shameful attempt to hide the First Minister from scrutiny".

One of the first questions centred on health and life expectancy after figures out today showing Scotland in a poor light. Ash Regan said: "We haven't made the progress on this we would have wanted to. I think it shows the constraints of devolution and why independence can't wait."

All three were agreed on the effects that over a decade of Westminster austerity has had in Scotland.

As far as taxation was concerned Humza Yousaf said he was in favour of progressive taxation which "would allow us to invest

in our public services – and in the Child Tax Payment which has been called transformative”. He explained his view that a second tax band at a high level is needed, outlining that it was based on a report produced before the last budget, and confirming that around £200 million might be raised. As an example he suggested that some of the money could be used in paying more to adult social care workers.

Kate Forbes supports more progressive tax powers but feels the best way is “to expand the tax base”, arguing that expanding the tax bands might mean that the result is less tax revenue, and that it might put people off coming here to live and work.

The two candidates who are widely speculated to be the two vying for the top job agree and disagree on progressive taxation, but the third, Ash Regan, said she would not go for tax first. She said it would be a better idea to raise tax from business rather than from people in work. She reminded the others, and the audience, that Scotland didn’t get a sovereign wealth fund last time from oil and gas, so we must not miss out this time when a fund could be established from renewable businesses.



Ash Regan MSP



Humza Yousaf MSP



Kate Forbes MSP

Gender Recognition Reform Bill

The Gender Recognition Reform Bill attracted the most heated part of the debate. Kate Forbes wants the bill to be brought back before parliament with “a bit more respect at the heart of the debate than was the case previously”.

Humza Yousaf reminded her that the bill has been passed by a majority in Holyrood and cannot really be changed at this stage. The bill has in any event been stymied by Westminster invoking Section 35 of the Scotland Act for the first time.

Ash Regan was clear and said: I think it is clear that the Parliament was out of step with the public’s view of this.” She also reminded anyone who did not already know that she had resigned from the government over the matter.

Quotes of the night:

Kate Forbes, when asked if she would include Humza Yousaf as Health Secretary, replied: "I would have him in government, and I would be happy to look at all options but it might be more a question if he wants to continue in health or not. It is a pretty gruelling gig. It is the hardest job in government by a country mile."

Humza Yousaf: "I have no doubt at all in my mind that whoever is the next leader of our party out of the three of us, whoever wins, we will all unite behind that leader, get right behind them, because the one thing that absolutely unites the three of us is working to deliver independence for Scotland."

Asked why she should be First Minister, Ash Regan replied: "I think we need someone who can as First Minister focus on the priorities that the Scottish people have – things like the NHS, the cost of living crisis. I think we need someone who can listen, who can have a big tent, a wide open door and a long table with no comfy chairs. I think we need someone strong at the moment, somebody who can stand up for what they believe in. And I think at this point we need someone who can stand up for Scotland and stand against Westminster."

Ahead of the debate, former First Minister, Alex Salmond, told Times Radio earlier in the week: "Clearly, things have gone wrong, badly wrong in SNP HQ. I like them all. I know Humza better than the two women as he used to work for me."

"But I have met the two women. I think all of them have outstanding qualities. Ash Regan has the best independence policy, Kate Forbes is a naturally gifted politician, that's obvious. Neither of these women has had much time to develop their campaigns which is one of the misfortunes of this election."

"And Humza Yousaf has questions to answer about his track

record in office, but is clearly a capable politician.”

Salmond denied backing any of the candidates at all saying: “I’ve got no dog in this fight. I’ve spoken to all three candidates at various times but I am not going to tell you the nature of these conversations. I have an old fashioned view that private conversations are private.”

The event was broadcast on Times Radio live and streamed on the Times Radio YouTube channel. An hour-long programme of reaction and analysis followed the debate, allowing everyone the chance to hear directly from the candidates as the days count down to Monday when the winner will be announced.

Times Radio Programme Director Tim Levell said: “Times Radio is all about quality live news, and we know listeners come to us for our political commentary especially around big events. Giving listeners a chance to hear from the three contenders fighting to be Scotland’s next leader is exactly what we’re all about.”

The winner will be declared after the vote closes at noon on Monday 27 March.

One thing is certain they will all be glad these rather spurious debates among people who have the same political beliefs, but have to find something to differentiate themselves from the other

candidates, are over, that the mad dash around the country is over, and they can get a good night's sleep for the first time in weeks.



Ash Regan MSP



Humza Yousaf MSP



Kate Forbes MSP