

## Comment

# Starmer struggles to strike back when his enemy goes 'post-truth'

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**B**leary-eyed, confused and with a bad taste in their mouth, viewers of Tuesday night's ITV debate between Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer no doubt woke on Wednesday morning with the political equivalent of a hangover.

Which version of last night's events should voters believe? The one where the Prime Minister claimed over a dozen times that if Starmer takes office, he would raise taxes by £2,000 per family?

Or the accusation made in the cold light of morning that Sunak had, quite simply, lied?

Arguably, Labour has been less vocal than it needed to be in debunking the Tory claims circulating for about three weeks. And – so the argument goes – Starmer was slow to shut down Sunak's claims during the debate, only belatedly dismissing them as “garbage” and “nonsense”.

But the more serious point is whether the Tories should have cooked up the misleading figure in the first place and whether, in the absence of fully costed published manifestos, unconvinced voters will add the prospect of tax rises to any remaining nagging doubts about what Labour would do in office.

The risk is that the £2,000

figure becomes this campaign's equivalent of Vote Leave's claim on the side of the Brexit battle bus that £350m could go to the NHS instead of the EU. When the shouting stopped it became clear that it hadn't mattered if it was true or not; the claim became emblematic in and of itself.

After the ITV debate, viewers could have switched over to the BBC News to sit through the fact-checking segment.

Elections can sometimes feel like American record producer Phil Spector's Wall of Sound, a mishmash of instruments designed to bamboozle the listener. In the cacophony, will anyone notice individual claims and counter-claims, which require effort to unpick?

And so we found ourselves on Wednesday morning with members of the Shadow Cabinet, venting years of frustration, finally allowed off the leash, accusing Sunak of outright lies.

Meanwhile, Sunak, who wants reluctant teenagers to study maths until 18, doubled down on a figure that is widely discredited, including by the Treasury's top

mandarin and the Institute for Government, which did some of the original work. Sunak tweeted a new campaign video of a flying piggy bank, telling voters they need to start saving for a Labour government.

Sunak's £2,000 claim is based on an analysis totted up

Treasury civil servants based on assumptions provided by Tory special advisers. It argues that there is a £38.5bn gap between what Labour's policies would cost and what its planned tax rises would raise.

Therefore, the thinking goes, Labour will have to sneakily raise taxes in future. It just hasn't told you yet. And that figure is £500 a year; £2,000 is the total over the next four years.

But Labour says the Tory figures are based on incorrect assumptions on some of its policies. On breakfast clubs for schools, the Tories claim that Labour will spend £4.5bn over four years. Labour says school numbers are falling and the Tories costed the policy at £60m.

Labour says its planned new GP hubs would use existing facilities and not cost the £458m that the Tories have attached to it. The party also says the Conservatives have misinterpreted the cost of hiring mental health professionals and improving the schools' regulator Ofsted.

Any investment in bus services will cost taxpayers £3.6bn over four years, the Tories claim. Not true, says Labour: reform will

not come from the central tax burden, instead local authorities will have to find the money.

“Repetition of information causes people to not only remember it, but also to believe it to be true – regardless of whether



or not it is actually true,” Professor Stephan Lewandowsky, an expert in misinformation at Bristol University, told **i**. “That information tends to stick around and simple corrections are only partially effective.”

“There are only a few ways in which a correction can be effective: first, by repeating it many times, and second, by providing people with an alternative explanation.”

Labour’s challenge now is clear, but difficult to hear. Its politicians need to grit their teeth, replace the £2,000 figure with an alternative and not repeatedly urge voters to accept that Sunak is lying, because doing so serves to amplify the claim.

Instead, Labour could provide an alternative explanation, perhaps by suggesting that Sunak – trailing 20 points in the polls – is simply desperate.

As for the Tories, don’t expect them to change tactics in a hurry, now that the public is finally paying attention to the differences between the parties.

A Tory strategist compared election campaigns to a pub quiz yesterday: “It’s like when all the early rounds are 50 questions with a point for each answer, but the final round is 10 points per question. The stakes are massively raised.”

“There is a limit to how long Labour can only rely on their vacuous ‘change, change, change’ message.”

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The Tories claim that Labour will spend £4.5bn over four years on breakfast clubs for schools  
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