

KAY: Who really won the Munk Debate on populism – and why

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Friday night's Munk debate between David Frum and Stephen K. Bannon at Toronto's Roy Thompson Hall had, as its topic, "Be it resolved, the future of western politics is populist, not liberal." It was a remarkable event for a variety of reasons.

The debate was a win for free speech

First, because it actually took place in this era of easy deplatforming. Bannon is a controversial and polarizing political icon. He is despised and feared on the left for his ideas, and more ominously (for them), because his ideas have been instrumental in shifting the seat of power in the U.S. from the populist left to the populist right in the even more loathed person of Donald Trump.

Cries of protest and demands to deplatform him rose up from across the land, and there was a moment when the protests seemed as though they might work to derail the debate. Happily, the Munk Debate organizers and Roy Thompson Hall stood firm. That in itself is a serious win for all proponents of freedom of speech.

It must have come as a shock to progressives who really don't know much about Bannon to discover that he does not have cloven feet or horns, and that fire does not emanate from his nostrils nor thunder from his mouth. Lo, he is a normal-looking fellow, moreover a polished speaker whose civil and courteous and humorous tone was indistinguishable from that of his always-dignified opponent.

The speakers treated each other with respect

The fact that David Frum treated Bannon as a peer was highly symbolic, conferring legitimacy on Bannon – not his views – as a human being worthy of being heard. In other words, their mutually respectful performance essentially deflated the righteous posturing of those hysterics who wanted to paint Bannon as a racist, and the anti-Semitic equivalent of Ernst Zundel, therefore unworthy of a public platform. They were implicitly reprimanded for their extremism, and that is both significant and a good thing.

Bannon protested yet not a hush about anti-Zionist Blumenthal

A relevant digression I cannot forbear to mention: In 2016, PEN International hosted a talk at the Toronto Reference Library – a talk, not a debate, in which the podium was given over entirely to polemicist Max Blumenthal, an anti-Zionist

bruiting such repulsively virulent hatred of Israel that the German Parliament won't allow him to enter its building. I wrote a column about it before it happened, hoping it would arouse the kind of animus we have seen displayed by the Bannon protestors, but there was no pushback to speak of, and the organizers were perfectly sanguine about the fact that they were not offering a debate format, and were comfortable with the fact that Blumenthal's lies and distortions could not be challenged. Any Jewish community leader who publicly protested Bannon because he is a controversial right winger, but did not protest Blumenthal – or at least did not call for a debate format – because he is left wing has no credibility whatsoever in my eyes. You know who you are.

Audience leaned heavily in favour of Frum

Coming into the debate, the audience was divided 73%-28% in favour of Frum's No stance. The numbers did not change in the post-debate poll. So it was a draw. Or rather a numerical draw. The fact that Frum did not flatten Bannon, or even draw another 5% of the vote away from him means, in a way, it was a victory for Bannon. For Frum had the home advantage and the smarts to make gains. That Bannon held his ground seems to me a testimony to the fact that given a level playing field, and this was, he was the better debater.

Frum's obsessive focus on Donald Trump

My main beef with Frum is that he often didn't speak to the topic, but focused obsessively on Trump. Trump is certainly an easy target for ridicule, but it wasn't his presidency that was at issue; it was populism in general. There are all kinds of people who recoil from Trump as a human being (I am such a one), but have mixed feelings about the need for someone as disruptive as he is. We don't dismiss Bannon out of hand, and we also do not consider either Trump or Bannon racist. So Frum wasted a lot of breath denouncing Trump's personal ethics and his lack of presidential gravitas. We know all that, but Trump's presidential demeanour and his personal character weren't the questions on the table.

Bannon claims the future is populist

Bannon kept to the topic. He posed the questions that should have been explored in depth, as, for example: "Why is the nation-state so scorned and demonized?" Here Frum chose not to engage directly; instead he fell into the trap of liberal bromides like "The future belongs to those who care about it," implying only globalists fall into that category, and that nationalism leads easily to tribalism and hatred of the Other. (Pretty insulting to Israel.).

Bannon wasn't having any of that. His provocative thesis was that the future was going to belong to populism; the only question was whether it would be a nationalist populism or a socialist populism. "That's the reality; the rest is just happy talk." By "happy talk" he meant sentimentality, and Frum was guilty as charged on that score.

In particular I was embarrassed by Frum's dual reference to the poppy he was wearing and what it stood for in Frum's eyes— i.e. liberalism at its finest – as a schlocky and highly sentimental gambit, having nothing whatsoever to do with the question. World War One was fought with conscripts on behalf of Britain, so although Canadian soldiers fought heroically, they really had very little choice in the matter; and World War Two was an existential battle against pure evil, not a tough call for either liberals or conservatives. We wear the poppy for our fallen soldiers in Afghanistan as well, also an absolutely justifiable war by any partisan criteria, and Frum's remarks by implication diminished their sacrifice.

Debate means the audience can now make up its mind

The big winners in this debate were freedom of speech, civility in the public forum and the fact that hundreds of thousands of people who will eventually see it can make up their own minds about Bannon's allegedly evil views.

The losers were activists on the far left, who looked stupid for their obstructionism in trying to prevent two of the brainiest polemicists in North America from duking it out on some of our era's most important questions. Bannon had the most to gain by a solid performance, and he gave it. Frum's performance did not meet expectations – not mine, anyway – and so, never mind the voting outcome, I would consider that Bannon is feeling triumphant today, while Frum may be experiencing something like a hangover.