



## Political Notebook by George Pascoe-Watson

Get your diaries out, these are the shows you won't want to miss.

The likely dates for Britain's first ever general election TV debates can now be revealed in a Portland Communications exclusive.

Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg will almost certainly meet for three live 90 minute shows on Thursday April 15, Thursday April 22 and Wednesday April 28.

The third programme will have to compete against the last semi-final of the UEFA Champions League match but BBC chiefs say they won't kick that Thursday's Question Time off the air to make way.

Programme schedulers have plumped for one Wednesday followed by two Thursdays to avoid a ratings clash with the televised semi-finals of football's Champions League.

Only a last minute change of heart - or the failure of Chelsea, Manchester United and Arsenal will get in the way, I am told.

The first showdown will take place in Manchester and be hosted by Alastair Stewart for ITV, the second will be in Bristol and be screened on Sky News with Adam Boulton the ringmaster.

And the final clash will be held in Birmingham with David Dimbleby at the helm on the BBC.

He has made a strong case not to be booted off the air with Question Time the following night to make way for his own leaders' debate.

TV executives and the leaders' offices have been working hard to ensure the maximum possible audience for the debates which are a landmark in British political history.

Clashing with the Champions League matches would be disastrous for TV audiences with at least 10million viewers switching onto see Chelsea, Manchester United or Arsenal who are all through to the final 16.

Most experts believe Lib Dem leader Mr Clegg has the least to lose and the most to gain from the TV debates.

His party remains firmly in the doldrums according to most polls and he is struggling to break through the 20% mark. Many expect the Lib Dems to lose seats at the next election.

A strong performance will help put him back on the map with waverers and those not settled on backing Tory or Labour.

The PM is convinced he will connect with TV viewers with his intellectual strength, his ability to point to Labour's improvements and most importantly, his handling of the banking crisis and global recession.

He sees himself as a leader with true world recognition - a contrast to the youthful and inexperienced Mr Cameron.



But some aides fear he will turn voters off with his tendency to read out lists of his work, his lack of empathy and lightness of touch - and they fear he could show aggression to his rivals which will go down badly with viewers.

Mr Cameron remains the most telegenic performer who is more at home on the TV and with a live audience than any British politician since Tony Blair.

However there are risks to the Tory leader if he comes across as too slick and polished and he is focusing relentlessly on giving a passionate and gritty performance.

The TV debates are certain to be amongst the most important "game-changing" moments in the 2010 general election.

Millions of voters are known to be "undecided" and they are likely to wait until they've seen the three leaders come face-to-face before making up their minds.

Many of you want to know how likely a Tory victory is at the next election on May 6.

The News of the World carried a powerful poll this week which has David Cameron heading for a 37 seat majority.

But I am struck by further evidence in their ICM survey - suggesting they could come to power with an 88 seat Commons majority.

The NotW survey says the Tories are on course for an 8.5% swing in marginal seats currently held by Labour - enough for a 37 seat majority.

But Mr Cameron would hit the 80-90 mark if that swing occurs in seats which are currently held by the Lib Dems.

Senior Conservative aides tell me they are hoping Lib Dem voters will act to kick Gordon Brown out of power, knowing they'd feel relatively comfortable with Mr Cameron as Premier.

But as I've pointed out - the TV debates could be a game-changer which no one can yet predict.

More Portland updates next week.