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# **Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, November 21, 2017**

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**Chair**

**The Honourable Larry Bagnell**



## Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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• (1205)

[English]

**The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)):** Order.

Good afternoon.

This is the 79th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, and we're public.

Today we're beginning the study of the creation of an independent commissioner responsible for leaders' debates

We're pleased to have with us the Hon. Karina Gould, Minister of Democratic Institutions. She's accompanied by Allen Sutherland, assistant secretary to cabinet, machinery of government.

Thank you for being here.

Please go ahead, Ms. Gould.

[Translation]

**Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Democratic Institutions):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Thank you very much for having me. I'm glad to be back at PROC.

I want to thank the committee for taking up a study of what a commission, or a commissioner, to organize a future federal political debate in Canada may look like. I've spoken to many of you already about this topic and I look forward to reading your report on this matter.

Before I get into the meat of it, why is this an important topic? For Canadians, leaders' debates are an opportunity to witness first-hand the personalities and the approaches of the people seeking to be their prime minister. Before we discuss the future of debates and how we ensure their important role in Canadian political life, it may be helpful to quickly cover the history of federal leaders' debates in Canada.

[Translation]

The first televised leadership debate in Canada was not conducted at the federal level. It took place during the 1962 Quebec provincial election—between Daniel Johnson and Jean Lesage. It would be another six years before Canada's first televised federal leaders' debate. It featured Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Tommy Douglas, Robert Stanfield, and Réal Caouette.

[English]

The 1968 election featured a single leaders' debate that was carried on all networks. It was bilingual and involved the leaders of every party with a seat in the House. For two election cycles after that, televised leaders' debates did not take place, and the next televised debate occurred during the 1979 election period. The 1979 debates attracted nearly 7.5 million viewers, which at that time was nearly 50% of Canadians who were eligible to vote.

There were no national televised leaders' debates during the 1980 election; however, debates did occur in 1984, and by 1988 they had become part of Canada's election tradition. Since 1984, televised debates have occurred in every successive federal election up to and including 2015. Unlike previous elections, the 2015 election did not feature debates that were broadcast by our national broadcasters.

[Translation]

For the last half-century, leaders' debates in Canada have usually been organized through discussions ahead of each election, led by a consortium of major broadcasters—CBC, Radio-Canada, Global, CTV, and TVA. This involved negotiations with political parties regarding dates, participation, and format.

[English]

It is worth noting the important contribution of the broadcast consortium. In order to better serve the Canadian public, the consortium partners agreed to put aside competitive differences and ensure that Canadians were able to witness their political leaders' debate in their own home.

[Translation]

That said, there is no set format. Televised debates in every election are a little different, either in number, format, or the list of parties that participate.

[English]

In the most recent federal election, media organizations outside of the established consortium organized four out of five debates under new formats and themes.

The experience of the 2015 election was a departure from the traditional practice of organizing debates. While in 2015 there were more debates than in previous elections, the total viewership for both the English and French debates was significantly lower. While the 2006, 2008, and 2011 debates had average audiences of over three million, the viewership of each of the 2015 debates was much lower. The *Maclean's* debate drew one and a half million viewers. The French TVA debate drew just under one million viewers. The *Globe and Mail* and Google Canada debate drew 780,000. The Munk debates drew 490,000, and the French consortium debate drew about 290,000.

• (1210)

[Translation]

Coverage of the 2015 election debates signalled a genuine public interest in how debates are organized, how debates' participation criteria are determined, how formats and themes are chosen, and how greater accessibility could be achieved through new means of transmission and outreach by Canada's traditional media groups and new media players.

[English]

The Prime Minister has given me, as the Minister of Democratic Institutions, a mandate to bring forward options to create an independent commissioner to organize political party leaders' debates during future federal election campaigns with a mandate to improve Canadians' knowledge of the parties, their leaders, and their policy positions.

[Translation]

Given that debates are an important exercise in our democracy, establishing an independent commissioner to organize political party leaders' debates would help ensure that the interests of Canadians are central to how leaders' debates are organized and broadcast.

[English]

A commission or commissioner would be responsible for considering the future of leaders' debates in an ever-changing digital environment and how debates should be distributed to ensure that they could be experienced by a broad cross-section of Canadians.

[Translation]

This new debates mechanism must strike a balance between the interests of all stakeholders, in other words, the Canadian public, political parties, broadcasters, new media organizations, and civil society. Most importantly, I am committed to ensuring that Canadians are at the heart of the new process.

[English]

There are various approaches that can be taken for organizing leaders' debates, and I will be curious to receive feedback and recommendations from this committee.

In one example, the 1991 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing recommended improving the consortium model by appointing a neutral chairperson to preside over the negotiations between media groups and political parties. Under this approach, the chairperson could be tasked with expanding the membership of the

consortium to include new media, public interest groups, academia, and other relevant groups.

In another example, the authors of a 2016 colloquium report entitled "The Future of Leaders' Debates in Canadian Federal Elections" recommended that a different approach be considered, whereby a single host broadcaster or organization would be mandated to organize leaders' debates. In particular, the authors suggested that the Cable Public Affairs Channel, or CPAC, could be well placed to design a debate to advance the democratic exercise.

[Translation]

International models include the creation of a new organization or advisory committee made up of diverse stakeholders, such as public interest, academic, and media groups. Whether as a parliamentary structure, a not-for-profit organization, or an independent government body, the committee would provide guidance and organize leadership debates. The U.S. Commission on Presidential Debates could serve as a model.

[English]

Overall, these suggested options are included to stimulate thinking and discussion about how a commissioner can be imagined.

[Translation]

Of course, there is much work to be done engaging with parliamentarians, broadcasters, political parties, experts, and Canadians.

[English]

Your committee's study and eventual report will provide valuable insight into the government's decision on this issue.

[Translation]

Debates are an important exercise in democracy. Beyond your study, I will be engaging stakeholders, academics, and Canadians directly.

We are currently in the process of finalizing our plans, and I will be making our broader engagement plan public in the coming weeks.

Going forward, we must uphold the notion that election debates are much more than just media events—they are a fundamental exercise in democracy.

[English]

Leaders' debates are a public good. As such, they must be organized in an open and transparent manner through a process that includes the independent representation of the public interest.

What follow are the five objectives that will guide me in my work.

The first is independence and impartiality. The entity must be guided by the public interest and must organize leaders' debates in a manner that is open, fair, and transparent.

• (1215)

[Translation]

The second objective is credibility. The entity must be trusted and supported by Canadians and stakeholders.

[English]

The third is democratic citizenship. The entity must institutionalize leaders' debates as a fundamental democratic institution and seek to ensure that leaders' debates are organized at every election.

[Translation]

The fourth objective is civic education. The entity must engage Canadians as broadly as possible and improve Canadians' knowledge of the parties, their leaders, and their policy positions so they are well prepared to exercise their right to vote in a modern democratic society.

[English]

Fifth is inclusion. The entity must include broad representation in its membership and advisory bodies to be reflective of Canadian society, and it must ensure that the inclusion of women, youth, indigenous peoples, and people with disabilities underpins its activities.

[Translation]

With these objectives in mind, I am looking for input from this committee on the following questions.

Who should organize the debates?

What role should the government play in organizing elections debates?

[English]

How can we accommodate legislative and non-legislative proposals?

How can we reach the largest number of Canadians?

[Translation]

How do we ensure that debates are accessible to all Canadians?

Should the commissioner establish a minimum number of debates in both official languages?

[English]

What should be the criteria for inclusion and participation? Where and how should the debates be broadcast?

[Translation]

How should production costs be covered by relevant stakeholders?

How should the education mandate of the independent commissioner be structured?

Again, I want to thank you for taking up this study and for inviting me today.

As I said, debates are an important exercise in our democracy. All of us here at the table have participated in debates at the local level, so we know just how important it is for voters to see politicians defend their policies and values.

[English]

Broadcasting leaders' debates nationally allows Canadians to watch their leaders in debate and to compare and contrast them,

which means they can make better-informed decisions about who is to lead their country.

With that, I look forward to your questions and your comments.

[Translation]

Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister.

[Translation]

It is now over to Ms. Tassi.

[English]

**Ms. Filomena Tassi (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.):** Thank you, Minister Gould, for your presentation this morning and for being here.

What are you anticipating in terms of a timeline? In order to make the decision about the establishment of a commission or commissioner, do you have a timeline in mind that can help determine the number of witnesses, etc., that we are going to have?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Yes. Certainly it's important to have something in time for the next election. Depending on what the structure is and whether or not it requires legislation, it would have to go through in the coming months or so. I'm hopeful about receiving the advice from your study.

As I mentioned, I have plans to do engagement as well. However, I'm going to be following the work of the committee quite closely and will use some of the information drawn out of the witnesses to also conduct further engagement in the new year and then bring forward some options and pursue an option based on all of those engagements, hopefully in the spring.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** Okay. Are you going to wait for the report from this committee before you start that engagement, or is that going to be commenced at the same time this committee is doing its study?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** My understanding is that the study is engaging in seeing witnesses for the next couple of weeks.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** Yes.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I'm going to follow what you're doing in the meantime. I probably won't begin my own engagement until early in the new year. However, I'm not sure that a report could be concluded within this timeline.

That said, the report that this committee produces will also inform my thinking in tandem with the work that I'm doing.

● (1220)

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** Okay.

In your opening remarks you discussed the background, but can you speak a little further about why you feel this is needed and what you are seeking to improve?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** We've had a fairly rich history of leaders' debates in Canada. Starting in 1984, we have had them consistently through all of our federal elections. I think that for Canadians they have become an important moment in an election campaign by allowing us to interact with the political leaders who are ultimately asking for our trust to become our prime minister and to lead us for three to five years, depending on the makeup of the government.

It's really about ensuring that they are institutionalized as a part of our democratic process and ensuring that Canadians have as much accessibility to those debates as possible. I know, as I'm sure many of you have experienced in talking with constituents, that it's often a pivotal moment for people making a decision to be able to interact and engage with political leaders, to understand where they are coming from on issues that are of importance and to see how they interact in different settings, whether domestically or internationally. It gives people a real window into the different personalities and leadership styles of those who are seeking to become their prime minister.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** Thank you.

One area that's really important to me is civic engagement and ensuring that we're reaching as many people as possible and trying to ensure that everyone is taking an interest. Can you speak about how you see the commissioner or the commission playing a role in the education of the public with respect to political parties, their leaders, and the positions that each of them takes? What do you think the impact of this position will be in that regard?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** That's a good question.

I don't really see the role of the commissioner as educating the public about political parties or their positions so much as ensuring that people know that leaders' debates are taking place, know who is participating, and know that they can be part of that process.

Obviously, political parties have their own means of communicating their platforms, their objectives, and their ideals to the public. That's not the role of the commission or the commissioner. Rather, it's to ensure that Canadians know when debates are taking place, where they can see them, and how they can engage with them. I think it's very important.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** How much more time do I have?

**The Chair:** You have two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** With respect to the role of the commissioner in improving accessibility for Canadians with disabilities, do you have any ideas in that regard? Are you looking for input on that aspect, so that Canadians with disabilities will have more access to debates and be able to be a part of them and experience them?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Certainly.

One of the interesting things about leaders' debates is the history of them. They really came from the first debate—was it 1960?—that was held during the American elections with John F. Kennedy. That was the first time that a leaders' debate had been publicized and broadcast on TV. Then Canada, like other countries around the world, took up this model and started to portray it.

What the U.S. has ensured is that during all of their leaders' debates, they have sign language translation that is broadcast

alongside. While there were some instances in the 2015 election of closed captioning or sign language, it wasn't consistent among all of the debates. I think the accessibility requirements and criteria are something to consider when imagining what a commission or commissioner would look like for leaders' debates.

I think all of us can agree that the more people have access and are able to understand with dignity and participate with dignity in the process, the better it is for the democratic process in general. I would definitely encourage the committee to think broadly about what accessibility means in this context.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** Very good. Great.

What are your thoughts on who should be included in the leaders' debates? Is there a threshold in order to meet a participation requirement? Do you have any ideas or input that you would like to offer on that aspect?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I'm hoping the committee will push and pursue what they think is reasonable and necessary for the robust political landscape that we have here in Canada. I think one of the things that's important and is a departure from the way things have been done previously is to have a process that's open and transparent, so that Canadians can know how these decisions were made and who was invited to participate.

What we saw in 2015 was that because leaders' debates had been so much a part of the national democratic experience in each federal election, people hadn't really thought much about how these debates were organized, who was invited, and when they occurred, because it all happened in secret behind closed doors.

The idea with this as well is to ensure that it is a public conversation and that a commissioner or a commission is leading these conversations about those criteria. I guess someone else could ask me to pursue it, but really quickly, it's that.... I lost my train of thought.

• (1225)

**The Chair:** Mr. Reid is next.

**Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC):** Minister, first of all, I'm glad to have you here. In the event that the answer you were going to give pops up partway through my question or your answer to the things I'm going to ask you, just share it with us. We'll deal with it that way.

You said you might look at a statute or might not. I know how you would set something up via a statute, but in the absence of a statute, how do you set up a commission or a commissioner in any meaningful sense, with the power to accomplish anything from making sure sign language is provided to making sure that the Green Party gets to participate to making sure that there's an equal number of French-language and English-language debates? I don't see how you do that in the absence of a statute, other than through an informal process that would look like what we have right now.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I think that's an excellent question.

One of the things I have been considering is whether we want to set something up informally in the interim to kind of test to see how it works before moving into a legislated option that might lock something in.

That said, one of the pieces I'm interested to hear about from the committee and witnesses is this. It has generally been considered very difficult to compel or force a party leader to participate in a debate through legislation. However, we could consider setting up an NGO or an arm's-length entity that would not be required through legislation and could be done through a G and C process. We could establish that first experience to see how it goes. Then, following the election, we could decide whether we're going to implement that in law.

However, I completely take your point that if it's not in statute or law, you run the risk of it not becoming something permanent. That's where I'm looking at the—

**Mr. Scott Reid:** I'm just not sure how it amounts to anything if it's not a statute, because presumably debates could be organized outside of it. I just don't see how you do it. It seems to me that you either have a rule—and we make rules around here via statutes—or you don't have a rule.

I just don't see it how you do it in a non-statutory fashion at all.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Well, if that's the recommendation from the committee, that would be something I'd appreciate.

I think there are ways you could do it. For example, you could set up, as I mentioned, an arm's-length entity that is established with criteria through a G and C. The idea is that because you've created it so publicly and you've had a public conversation about it, if it were not to go through or if it were not to be successful, there would be a public questioning as to why that was the case. Political leaders or other stakeholders would have to explain why they're not participating in it. There's a certain amount of public momentum that could follow from that, and that's one option that is possible.

The other question is with regard to legislation and enabling enough flexibility to adapt to changing times. One of the things I'm thinking about is with regard to the parameters of this entity, whereby you say the commission or the commissioner must establish an English-language and French-language debate, but there could also be more debates. We don't want to be in a situation of limiting the number of debates or the number of chances for people to participate, but what are those parameters? Is there a basic level of criteria that we can all agree to, and then enable some kind of flexibility for a commissioner to be able to manage the debates themselves?

• (1230)

**Mr. Scott Reid:** I promised Mr. Nater that I'd give him the rest of my time, so let me know.

I'll honour my word and will turn things over to him.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Okay. Thank you, Mr. Reid.

**Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, as well. I appreciate your joining us.

You talked about five principles that go into your thinking on this. The first one was independence and impartiality.

We've talked a bit about whether the commission or commissioners would be statutory or ad hoc or at arm's length. Would you be willing to commit to this committee that any commission or commissioners who may be appointed would only be appointed if they have the consensus support of political parties recognized in the House?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I'd be curious to hear the feedback first.

It would definitely depend on what the model looked like as well, what kind of avenue we were going down, and what kinds of people we were looking for. In the United States, for example, the debates commission is a bipartisan organization.

There's the possibility to say that perhaps there should be representatives from each party on the commission. There could also be a suggestion that the people who are on it should not be affiliated with political parties and should maybe have more of a journalistic or academic or civil society background. I'd like to first hear from the committee as to what they think the most successful model would or could be, or what the parameters would be.

**Mr. John Nater:** You're not willing today to make that commitment, then.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I'd like to hear about it and actually go through the study first.

**Mr. John Nater:** Okay. I just find it interesting you're advocating impartiality and independence, but then not willing to make that commitment to a consensus approach.

Moving on, you talked about democratic citizenship, democratic civic education. My background is in political science. I spent time as a lecturer at King's University College and talked about issues such as this.

One of the misconceptions in Canadian politics is that you vote for the prime minister. You don't vote for the prime minister unless you live in one of the five ridings where a political party leader is running, yet establishing, as you're hoping to do, a process in which we establish a leaders' debate, the supremacy of the party leader, almost seems to go against the idea of civic education, of informing people that in fact there are 338 separate elections going on at the exact same time in each and every political riding.

I know I participated in somewhere between 11 and 13 all-candidates debates in my riding, constantly trying to focus on the fact that each member of Parliament is running individually, yet here we're establishing a leader-dominated process, a process that seems counterintuitive to what we're talking about in terms of civic education and democratic knowledge.

I think my time is up, but I'll leave that if you have time for a comment.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Do I have time to respond?

**The Chair:** Go ahead, briefly.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I think it's great that you mentioned that of course people vote for their local members of Parliament, but we also know one of the reasons there are higher turnouts in federal elections is that there is just more media attention. There are more people involved in talking about it on a day-to-day basis right across the country.

I think for Canadians—and I think many of you would agree, because you have probably spoken to constituents—that leaders' debates are pivotal moments for a lot of voters in making that decision. While you're absolutely correct that we have to do a better job at civic engagement right across the country—because I think we spend a lot of time talking about it abroad, and not necessarily here at home—I still think this is a very important exercise in the democratic process, particularly during elections, because it enables Canadians to have that connection and that ability to witness how their leaders may react in different situations.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Before I go to the next speaker, I have a quick technical question following Mr. Reid's. Wouldn't a G and C initiative have to be provided for in a regulatory power of some legislation?

This is for either Mr. Sutherland or Ms. Gould.

**Mr. Allen Sutherland (Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Machinery of Government, Privy Council Office):** I'm sorry. Are you referring to a Governor in Council or a grants and contributions initiative ?

• (1235)

**The Chair:** I'm not sure what the minister was referring to when she said "G and C".

**Mr. Allen Sutherland:** I believe she was referring to a grants and contributions.... What she was looking to do was the establishment of an entity that would examine the issues—

**The Chair:** I see.

**Mr. Allen Sutherland:** —and come up with proposals.

**The Chair:** By giving them a grant?

**Mr. Allen Sutherland:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Garrison.

**Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to suggest that to facilitate the Green Party's schedule, we just flip the order and allow Ms. May to go first. I know she has another commitment.

**The Chair:** Mr. Simms is also graciously giving his time up for Ms. May.

**Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP):** This is probably, Mr. Chair, the most gracious and generous group of humans around a committee table that I've ever had the joy to encounter. I can't thank you enough.

I have been, as some of you will know, and as the minister knows, one of those leaders who has been through what I would call the leaders' debates wars. I've had the experience of meeting with the

consortium. I do know that they did have rules, at least one of which they stated publicly, which was that you have to have one elected MP or at least one MP. Initially, the Bloc Québécois had members who had moved from other parties, and the Reform Party was in the national leaders' debate for the first time before Preston Manning had won his seat but when Deb Grey had, so there were rules.

I know I'm not here to give evidence. I'm grateful that the committee has called the Green Party, and the vice-president of the party will be here on Thursday to present.

I want to add a bit to the minister's answer on why the leaders' debates matter, and then ask some questions.

Only because of my involvement as leader of a much smaller party am I aware that the national media decisions around which parties get covered on a regular basis during the election hinges on that decision about inclusion in the debates. It's actually something that has been controlled by media. It's been very hard and opaque to understand the process, because the news media themselves can't cover themselves well.

Decisions about inclusion or non-inclusion have really large-scale implications for public information about parties. It's almost been as though the national news media have been able to say, "This is a real party, but this one isn't." Even then, having won a seat, I just wanted to say something about your mentioning that 2015 was a departure from traditional practice. The Green Party was invited to participate in the national televised English-language and French-language debates, but when the prime minister said he wasn't going to appear in the debates, that's when things went quite sideways.

I had a few questions about how you see this moving ahead. I'm very grateful that the government is taking action to create some rules and to set up a commissioner. As you see the development of the rules going forward, how much do you see as an advantage that there will be some continuity of the traditional past practice of ensuring that you have at least one seat? Is that a reasonable criterion going forward?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I think that is a reasonable criterion going forward.

**Ms. Elizabeth May:** I don't know if you've looked at it, though I suspect you have, because I've mentioned it to you before. The Centre for the Study of Democracy at Queen's University, after the 2008 election, under the guidance of Tom Axworthy, did a fairly substantial study on leaders' debates and suggested something about focusing solely on the leaders.

We're a Westminster parliamentary democracy. None of us runs for prime minister. It's not an elected position. It's not like running for president in the U.S. We have a Westminster system through which we elect, in this case, 338 MPs, and under our Constitution it would be perfectly legal for us to get together after an election and decide which one of us should be prime minister. We only skip that step because of the extra constitutional process of political parties, which self-organize and choose a leader, which is why we don't have to figure out who the prime minister is after an election. We kind of know, unless it's a hung parliament.



Tom Axworthy's Centre for Democracy recommendations were to highlight the idea that we are, in fact, a Westminster parliamentary democracy. Leaders' debates are great, but we should also, potentially, have finance critics' debates and bring more MPs into the mix with national televised debates. I know this committee will do the work, but I wonder what you, as minister, think of that notion of more debates that are not solely for the various leaders.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I think that's a really interesting point. It builds on what Mr. Nater was talking about, the fact that there could be different thematic debates with different party representatives who participate in them. That's where I think the point is. I would not want a commission or a commissioner to limit the amount of debate but to instead provide the criteria and the transparency for how debates are established and how they are broadcast.

I'm very open to that conversation. You and I have spoken about this before. One of the greatest disappointments in 2015 was the fact that there was no women's debate. That debate would have really added to the conversation. Kudos to the organization for creating a different format to ensure that those issues were dealt with; however, it wasn't something for which all of the leaders or even different party representatives were present. I do think we have an opportunity to create something innovative, something that will encourage greater participation in our democracy and greater awareness of different issues during an election.

• (1240)

**Ms. Elizabeth May:** I agree with you that it was one of the greatest disappointments of the 2015 election.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Sure, in—

**Ms. Elizabeth May:** I was included—

**Hon. Karina Gould:** —the debates context.

**Ms. Elizabeth May:** I planned to be in the 2015 women's debate, and the Green Party was scheduled—for those people who didn't know this—for the English language leaders' debate, which was to take place on the Thursday before the Thanksgiving weekend, until it was cancelled. Although I was disappointed not to have a women's debate, I was very disappointed not to have an English-language televised debate among the leaders at all.

That brings me to this question: how would one compel the leader of a party to show up, particularly if it's the prime minister?

Certainly the committee will study this question. The only thing I can think of that would be an effective sanction would be around rebates for expenditures during the election. I got this idea based on Kennedy Stewart's private member's bill—which I thought was excellent—on how to encourage parties to have women on their slates. Any party that fell below gender parity would experience less of the reimbursement that the people of Canada now give all the large parties, or all the parties. Any party that qualifies gets back most of what they spent on the election campaign.

I wonder how you'd react to the idea that if a leader of a party that was expecting the largesse from the people of Canada to pay back their expenses in an election campaign chose to shun one of the key ways in which Canadians can engage with an election campaign by not showing up, or threatening not to show up, and derailing the debates.

Would it be appropriate to look at amending the Elections Act to include a financial sanction to their party for a leader who didn't show up?

**The Chair:** Be very brief, Minister, because the time is up.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I'm not sure about the practicalities of compelling a leader to participate. I would hope that the punishment for not participating would be at the ballot box, because I think Canadians expect their political leaders to participate.

**Ms. Elizabeth May:** Thank you again to this extraordinary collection of human beings, saints in politician form.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Elizabeth.

Go ahead, Mr. Garrison.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** I feel very lucky to be here today when this topic is in front of us. Like all MPs, at this point there's a danger of reverting to being a recovering political scientist or a recovering lawyer. I don't really want to go there today.

I want to thank the minister for laying out some clear principles that I think are worthy of support in this endeavour. My concern is that the perfect not be the enemy of the good.

We need something to avoid the problems we had in the last election. I was interested to hear you talk about a possible interim solution as an innovative way. Could you say a bit more about that in terms of timing and how that might work? It's really only about 18 months before the next campaign probably begins.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Thank you.

I would agree with you. I don't want perfect to become the enemy of the good either in this case. I do think it's really important.

I guess one of the challenges with the legislative option is having enough time to get it through the whole process. That said, there may be an element, such as a small legislative tweak, that may be made with a bit more flexibility in what the commission or commissioner would look like.

From a nascent point of view, I would be thinking about establishing some kind of grants and contributions policy that would lay out the criteria for a commission or a commissioner to establish some of the basic requirements for participation in a debate and who we would encourage to engage with in broadcasting. One of the models that I think is interesting, whether it's CPAC or not, is having a broadcaster tasked with hosting the debate and then providing transmission to any interested stakeholder or party, whether that's a broadcaster, social media, political party, citizens' interest group, or whatever it may be, but providing that transmission so it can be shown wherever.

• (1245)

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** I think it's important that we get somewhere before the campaign begins, because all the co-operation you see in this room today tends to disappear very quickly once you get closer to an election date.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** That's a very good point. There needs to be something at least a year in advance of an election.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** That's exactly the question I was going to ask you.

Ms. May and I are good neighbours, but by the time we get to the campaign, one of us may or may not have gone door to door in the other one's riding during the election, and the goodwill tends to go away at that point.

I guess my other very specific question is, do you believe there's sufficient time for a legislative option? I am beginning to doubt there is, even without foot-dragging by anybody here in Parliament. I have trouble seeing how we get a legislative option in place a year in advance.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I think it would depend on the outcome of the committee and the outcome of my engagement and the input that I'm seeking. If there is significant general consensus, there may have been a lot of work already done before we get to a legislative option in terms of being able to move it more quickly through the House. I think it would really depend on how robust that legislative option may be or not.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** Do you feel, as the minister, that you have the resources available if we reach that kind of consensus? Do you have the resources available, as a minister, to put this in high gear and get that legislative option in place? Sometimes there is a crunch of resources.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I always hope I have the resources available, but it's certainly a priority for me to get this done, because I think it is very important.

The other part is that it depends on the kind of funding structure. I think I'm certainly open to a role for federal funding for this. It just depends on what we're looking at. In the past, the consortium has been responsible for funding, but mind you, they've put aside their differences and said this is a public good and that they're going to work on this together.

What that funding would look like depends on the kind of model. If it depends on how much it is, I'll have to consider that as well.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** I have to say that I did not share my question list with the minister. She keeps anticipating my questions and answering them in advance. I was concerned about the question of funding, which I think would be necessary to make this move expeditiously.

I think we're in a peculiar situation now, which gives us an opportunity to do this in a political environment that's less complex. In other words, because we're not proceeding with proportional representation, it's probably a good opportunity for us to get this commission established, because proportional representation will complicate this issue of debates in the future.

While I'm not in the business of thanking the government for abandoning that promise—certainly not—I do think it means that if we don't get this done now, and if we later move to proportional representation, it becomes much harder to do this in a proportional representation environment.

I wonder if you have any thoughts on that.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I think we have a moment right now to do it. I'm particularly grateful to the committee for taking an interest and studying this issue. I think that this is a good example of how we can work together, hopefully in a way that's going to produce a

democratic institution that benefits all Canadians, regardless of partisan politics or party politics.

I'm very hopeful that we're going to get some really robust feedback from this process and also from the consultations I'll be conducting as well.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** I understand from the chair that there are only 30 seconds left, so I think I'll close at that point, unless you've had your other thought come back.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Not yet, but if it does, I'll let you know.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** Thank you very much.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Thank you.

● (1250)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Garrison.

Now we'll go on to Mr. Richards.

**Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC):** You've mentioned in your five criteria that one of them is this idea of entrenching leaders' debates as part of federal elections. That wasn't quite the language you used, but that's essentially what you were suggesting.

You mentioned in your opening remarks, I think, that the first televised debate for a federal election was in the 1960s. I would assume there hasn't been an election since then when one didn't occur.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Yes, there was, in 1980.

**Mr. Allen Sutherland:** In 1972, 1974, and 1980.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** In 1972, 1974, and 1980.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** When was the last federal election that was held without a televised leaders' debate in Canada?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** It was in 1980.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** In 1980 there was no televised leaders' debate?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Correct.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Since then, there has always been one.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** A televised debate? In 2015 there was no English televised debate. There was no nationally broadcast debate in 2015.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I seem to recall that there were several debates that took place that were televised.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** But they weren't broadcast by national broadcasters.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** That's different from my recollection.

What I wanted to ask you about today was this. We've been able to successfully see debates organized in Canada for years. As far as I know, in all other democracies in the world that I'm aware of, they've been organized without government involvement.

It seems as though trying to involve the government in more and more things is typical of your government. Getting involved in pretty much every facet of Canadians' lives is the approach this government is taking, including the idea of debates in a federal election now, but government involvement always ends up meaning more money coming out of taxpayers' pockets in one way or the other.

I'm wondering if you've given any thought at this point to what the cost would be to taxpayers. I know you haven't fully developed your proposal, but you obviously have been giving some thought to this. You would have hopefully thought about the cost to taxpayers. Do you have any idea of what the cost would be to set something like this up, and what the cost would be to fund it annually?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Getting back to your original comment, in 2015 the key change was that there was no nationally televised English leaders' debate because of a decision of a political party leader not to participate, which precipitated a change in the formats. We saw a significant decrease in viewership, despite more types of debates going on.

What 2015 did demonstrate was that there was a very high public interest in ensuring that there were leaders' debates and in understanding how the process worked. I think that prior to 2015 and prior to the former prime minister making that decision, Canadians knew that there were going to be leaders' debates in English and French. Because of those actions, we have come to the point of saying that this is important for Canadians and that they do want to have this conversation.

With regard to funding—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Fair enough. I don't mean to interrupt you, but I have only a certain amount of time.

I understand your point here, but the question is—

**Hon. Karina Gould:** It's important to correct the record as well.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** —have you thought about what it would cost? What's the cost going to be for taxpayers to set something like this up?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** That depends. One of the things that's important is recognizing that this is a public good and is part of our democratic process. Therefore, the question is, depending on the model, is there a need for public funding or not a need for public funding?

I think that if it's an individual commissioner, that could be the equivalent of a salary. If it's a commission, it could be the equivalent of several salaries for the year leading up to an election. If it is a greater conversation about saying that we are going to ask or mandate a specific broadcaster to develop this, maybe it's the cost of production. There are lots of questions, I think, with regard to what that is. I don't foresee it being an exorbitant cost. I think it's certainly within the means and within the realm of being viewed as a tangible public good that is being delivered.

For example, Spain's ministry of arts, education, and science, I believe, pays for their public leaders' debates, and then allows broadcasters to distribute them publicly across whatever channel they decide.

• (1255)

**Mr. Blake Richards:** What you're suggesting is that this commission might not necessarily be a commission at all. It might simply consist of the federal government providing production costs to someone to produce the debates. Is that what you're suggesting?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I think there has to be a commission or a commissioner regardless.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Then what model—

**Hon. Karina Gould:** But there may be an additional fee associated with that.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** How would a model look that would enable there not to be a cost for a commission, then? You imply that there might be a model whereby there wouldn't be a cost for a commission, but only production costs.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** No, I said “in addition”.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** So there would be some costs.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** There would be a cost. I don't foresee it being a very big cost at all, but I definitely think it is valuable to Canadian democratic engagement.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Obviously I think there should be some consideration given to the cost, and it sounds as if that really hasn't been properly done at this point. I hope that will be done very soon and very quickly, because it does matter—

**Hon. Karina Gould:** It obviously depends on what the entity would look like—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Well, of course, but you indicated that you —

**Hon. Karina Gould:** —and that's something that I'm seeking input on, so—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** You have already indicated that you've given some thoughts to what those might look like, so I would assume costs would have been considered in that as well.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I know, but we have to have a conversation about what that would look like before we have a conversation about costs.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** That's the conversation I've been trying to have here.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Yes.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** We can't just avoid that.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Simms is next.

**Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.):** Yes, I would agree. It's hard to figure out how much a vacation costs if you don't know where you're going yet.

I wanted to talk about some of the models that are out there. I always look at the Americans for the model to do that, the not-for-profits—

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Yes.

**Mr. Scott Simms:** —and that sort of thing. I look at the neutrality around it in doing it, but there are always rules that go in that a lot of people take issue with. Obviously, the smaller third parties in America have a big problem with some of the rules, like the 15% rule and so on, in terms of the capability of getting a majority. It's probably similar to what Elizabeth May brought up earlier.

Obviously, you have to cast some pretty broad parameters and ideas out there to do this. What kinds of discussions have you had? Have they been mostly about who is involved in setting this up, as opposed to what it is we're looking at? Have you looked at other models and said "That's a good idea, and that's a good idea, and not so much this one", and that sort of thing?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I think what's interesting is that we have an opportunity to create something new, so we can look at different models. What's interesting about the U.S. model is that it is a bipartisan NGO that sets up leaders' debates and organizes them for each federal election. That may or may not be a model that works here in Canada.

I do think it's important that we have input from political parties. I do think it's important that we have input from parliamentarians. I do think it's important that we have input from broadcasters, both traditional and new, to ensure that we're getting as wide an audience as possible.

When it comes to criteria, I think it would be very useful to hear from this committee. My initial thought is that it does make sense to participate if you have a seat in the House or 5% of the national vote. There is also an argument to be made to have a separate debate for, perhaps, smaller parties as well. That could be something.

Spain's model, I think, is very interesting. They have a public entity that funds and organizes the debates and then enables the transmission across different channels. We have an opportunity to create something Canadian that fits within our own democratic engagement and process and fits what's important for voters here in Canada.

**Mr. Scott Simms:** Yes, I like this idea very much. I liked this idea long before it became a platform commitment, because I've been here 14 years and I've seen it time and time again. Most of it was played out within the media. Most recently the discussion has shifted from who should be involved to what platform we choose in doing this. There are so many platforms by which you could do it. Therefore, they have to make that decision.

Another reason I like it goes back to a few years ago in Great Britain when I was watching a debate. It was two elections ago. They had the Labour Party, the UKIP, and the Lib Dems, and I thought to myself that the Conservatives refused to be there. It turns out they weren't even invited. It was a debate between opposition parties only, in which there was government bashing ad nauseam. I thought it was unfair. However, the reason they chose this format was that they wanted to bring in more viewers. This was their consortium.

This is where I think that if it's left to a consortium, left to people who are looking strictly for eyeballs, we could find ourselves spiralling a little bit out of control. You're going to get everything from.... I don't know. It simply becomes very prescriptive. I hope that we don't go that way either, but in this case I hope that we have someone, a commissioner, who is familiar with the format and is able to provide a neutral body on all platforms.

• (1300)

**Hon. Karina Gould:** That's the objective, to have neutrality and impartiality, but also to ensure that the public interest is at the centre of how debates are structured and broadcast, because ultimately I really do believe it is a public good.

**Mr. Scott Simms:** Good.

**The Chair:** You have 30 seconds.

**Mr. Scott Simms:** Thank you for coming.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Thank you for having me.

**The Chair:** Okay. The last person is Mr. Nater.

**Mr. John Nater:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Again, thank you, Minister.

In your opening comments you said there was a suggestion made in a report that perhaps CPAC could be the entity designated to potentially host, but in your response to Mr. Richards' questions, you noted that there was no nationally televised debate in 2015. I find that kind of troubling, because CPAC did, in fact, televise the English-language debates.

Are you implying that CPAC—you know, the collection of our cable broadcasters, the great educational tool—isn't good enough, isn't a national broadcasting entity?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** No, I'm absolutely not implying that in any way whatsoever. What I was stating is that in 2015 it wasn't nationally broadcast across various national broadcasters, which had been the tradition prior to that.

**Mr. John Nater:** So because it wasn't on CBC, it doesn't count, yet it was on CPAC, which is really—

**Hon. Karina Gould:** You're really trying to put words in my mouth right now, Mr. Nater.

**Mr. John Nater:** No, I'm not putting any words in your mouth. You said that it wasn't nationally broadcast, but the fact is that it was broadcast on CPAC on their various platforms, including online.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** You're being very suggestive right now.

**Mr. John Nater:** Okay, so let me say, then, that your concern is that it wasn't broadcast on CTV, CBC, and Global. That's your concern.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** It wasn't widely distributed or broadcast on national broadcasters—

**Mr. John Nater:** So had those other three—

**Hon. Karina Gould:** —which was very different from previous national debates, which we saw had a much higher viewership than all of the debates in 2015.

**Mr. John Nater:** In your opinion, then, national leaders' debates should be broadcast on CBC, CTV, and Global.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** My objective is to see national leaders' debates broadcast as widely as possible, whether that's on traditional broadcasters, new media, the Internet, on your phone, or whatever the case may be. It's to make it as publicly accessible as possible for people to view and engage and interact in that political process.

**Mr. John Nater:** Okay, so what prevented CBC from picking up the feed from the last election's leaders' debates?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Do you know, Allen?

**Mr. Allen Sutherland:** You'd need to talk to them.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Yes, you'd have to ask them. Hopefully they're on your witness list so that you can ask them.

**Mr. John Nater:** I believe the answer would be "nothing". They simply didn't take up the feed. It was generally available.

You mentioned that you believed perhaps one sitting MP should be enough to trigger participation, or 5%. How would you determine that 5%?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Do you mean the 5% of the national vote?

**Mr. John Nater:** Would it be from the last election or from opinion polling?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** It's been done before.

**Mr. Allen Sutherland:** It's been done before.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Both of those things have been criteria for participation, but I'm open to hearing feedback on that.

I do think there is an important role for political parties to participate, and we see that parties of different sizes also play an important role in the national dialogue and discourse.

**Mr. John Nater:** Some countries have multiple debates, including what might be called a "duelling round" in which only the top two parties may debate. Is that something you would endorse?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** It's something on which I would be open to hearing feedback and suggestions from this committee and from the witnesses who participate.

Again, as I've said numerous times today, I don't see the commission or the commissioner as limiting the amount or the

format or the style of debate, but as ensuring that there are debates that happen and providing the criteria for participation.

**Mr. John Nater:** Then in theory you would be okay with a commissioner who could schedule three, four, five, or six debates. Would that be something you could conceivably envision?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I think what we want to do is provide the parameters for what participation looks like, for how it's distributed, for what the objectives are, and then provide some flexibility for the commissioner to work with stakeholders, which includes political parties, broadcasters, and perhaps academia and civil society, to design what that looks like in the course of an election.

• (1305)

**Mr. John Nater:** We all know the structures they have in Australia and Germany, and you mentioned the United States, Canada, and New Zealand. They all have slightly different approaches, and it's all being done effectively at arm's length from the government.

We all think about this on a daily basis. I'm sure we have ideas.

What country do you think does debates best, in your personal opinion?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I think every country probably does something that's right for them. I think that in Canada we've actually had some very good leaders' debates, and we've seen different models. What's most important to me is that we create something that's going to be flexible enough to adapt to changing times, while still ensuring this is part of the process and is accessible for Canadians.

**The Chair:** You have 10 seconds.

**Mr. John Nater:** Thank you, Minister.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister. We certainly hope we'll be able to provide you with a comprehensive report with some creative ideas to help your thinking. We appreciate your being here today.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** The meeting is adjourned.

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