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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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• (1145)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Welcome, everyone, to the 81st meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Today we are continuing our study of the creation of an independent commissioner responsible for leaders' debates.

We are pleased to be joined by Paul Wells, senior writer at *Macleans* and, by video conference from Boston, Vincent Raynauld, assistant professor in the department of communication studies at Emerson College and

[Translation]

affiliate professor, literature and social communications department, Université du Québec à Trois Rivières.

[English]

Thank you for being here.

Mr. Reid, is it just about the process here?

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): There were partial consultations, because people were drifting in. It was suggested to me by staff, and we had a chance to chat with a few but not all of the members about the idea of sitting a little bit later. If we go until about a quarter past one, we could have 45 minutes per panel. It means the second panel would start later than anticipated, but we would actually get at some kind of interaction.

Would that be reasonable? We'd just rely on the clerk to adjust questions from each party according to how much time we have.

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, do you have any comments?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Andrew Lauzon): That's certainly feasible.

The other possibility could be to have all the witnesses stay until 1:00 or 1:15 and have one large panel with all the witnesses.

Mr. Scott Reid: Sure.

The Clerk: As it is right now, I have spoken to Mr. Wells and Mr. Raynauld, and they are both available to stay later through the second panel.

Mr. Scott Reid: That might be even better, frankly.

The Chair: Are any opposed to that? We would stay until 1:15, and we'd have all the panellists at the beginning.

Okay. Let's do it.

Are the other panellists ready?

The Clerk: We have two of them down there. Do you want to introduce the others?

The Chair: I will just introduce the other ones now, then, too.

By video conference we have from Vancouver, Maxwell A. Cameron, professor, department of political science, University of British Columbia.

[Translation]

By video conference, from Quebec City, we also welcome Thierry Giasson, full professor, political science department, Université Laval.

[English]

By video conference from St. John's, we have Alex Marland, professor, department of political science, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Thank you, all, for being here.

Maybe we'll start with you, Mr. Wells, because we can see you in person. Then we'll go to the video conferences.

Mr. Paul Wells (Senior Writer, Maclean's, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and honourable members. It is thrilling for me to be speaking to your committee. This is the first time in 23 years on Parliament Hill that I'm sitting in a witness chair instead of at the media table.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Paul Wells: I'm happy to notice that my colleagues are doing what I normally do, which is skipping a committee meeting. And don't worry, I have no intention of making a habit of this.

I should note that while I am an employee of *Macleans* and of Rogers, and I have always been a keen student of what is good for my employers, I am not speaking today as their designated representative but as an individual.

I am here at the committee's invitation. I can only guess, because it wasn't explained, but my hunch is that it's because I moderated the *Macleans* national leaders' debate in 2015. It was the first debate in the history of Canadian elections that wasn't organized by a consortium of broadcast networks. As such, it upset some people. I believe we did good journalism.

[Translation]

I might make myself more useful today by explaining how the 2015 campaign differed from the 11 previous campaigns, during which the only debates were those organized by broadcasters' consortia. I will explain why I believe, and hope, that 2015 was not a mere aberration, but rather the dawn of a new and promising era in Canadian democracy.

I will explain first why the consortium model was necessary in the past, why it is less necessary or not necessary at all today, and why any attempt to impose a new version of the old, monolithic model could prove very counterproductive.

[English]

How did the consortium debates come to be? At first it was a combination of true civic-mindedness and necessity. There was real generosity in the broadcast networks' decision to organize the 1968 leaders' debate. There was also the fact that nearly 50 years ago, only the combined expertise of several networks and their combined news budgets could get cameras into the Centre Block and a live television feed out of it.

For most of my life there was no realistic alternative to a debate organized by a broadcast consortium. Over the last couple of decades, that changed. First, CPAC and a constellation of small, new networks, and then the Internet and social media became viable conduits for the information a debate provides. By 2015, it was feasible for others to organize debates without relying on the big networks. At least two party leaders, the Conservative Party's Stephen Harper and the NDP's Tom Mulcair, saw a tactical interest in encouraging such efforts. So, *Maclean's* organized a debate, as did *The Globe and Mail*, sort of, the Munk debates, and two competing French-language broadcast partnerships in Quebec. The old networks declined to carry the signal the English debate organizers offered. As a result, fewer people saw the 2015 debates as they happened than in previous election campaigns. That was a serious flaw.

However, our debate was viewed, as Minister Gould said here the other day, by 1.6 million people on television, and as she didn't say, by large numbers of people on a wide assortment of Internet outlets, including several news websites, YouTube, Facebook, and more. All the debates received saturation news coverage and polling suggests they influenced public opinion.

My main point to you today is that the technological revolution that made 2015 possible is continuing and accelerating. Costs of mounting a live broadcast have collapsed to near zero. By 2019 and 2023, the number of organizations with the wherewithal to organize debates and to get them in front of audiences will be much bigger still than in 2015.

It would therefore be odd to recreate, by public policy, a simulacrum of the broadcast consortium's old, natural monopoly long after the conditions that created that monopoly have ended. As Paul Adams from Carleton University told this committee last week, the consortium partners kept very pragmatic considerations, like audience size and scheduling conflicts, in mind when organizing their earlier debates. Good for them. They should. Anyone else would keep similar considerations in mind. We sure did. But

precisely so: the debate model you grew up with was not handed down on stone tablets from a perfect deity. It was a product of its times, both flawed and wonderful. And the times have changed.

● (1150)

[Translation]

In the past few years, I have told my friends that the model for leaders' debates in the near future might take the form of an average citizen from Regina or Moncton inviting the party leaders to their home to sit around the kitchen table, with the conversation being broadcast from coast to coast via Periscope or Facebook Live. In my opinion, the future looks a lot more like that than the old, monolithic model we are used to.

[English]

At least that's one possible future if this committee and the government don't try to capture the past in a bottle by mandating a single, monolithic, "one size fits every campaign" model of debates.

I was struck by how every witness you heard last week called for a light, adaptable debate commission that would vet, and in some cases endorse, debate proposals, sometimes surprising and unexpected proposals, from a wide variety of outside proponents, every witness, that is, except the minister. Minister Karina Gould said she wants to institutionalize debates and ensure "broad representation of membership and advisory bodies to be reflective of Canadian society and ensure the inclusion of women, youth, indigenous peoples, and people with disabilities".

I can only laud the instinct behind that sort of statement, but that language mirrors her predecessor's language during this government's early, brief attempt at reforming the electoral system last year. It sounds to me like it could be a formula for endless internal process arguments leading to debates that would last about six hours and have the leaders of seven or nine parties interrogated by a panel of 40 jurors chosen through what we would no doubt be assured was an open, transparent, and merit-based selection process, and no less open to criticism for all that.

Would representatives of small business, the Canadian Medical Association, the skilled trades, or advocates of proportional representation be included? Why or why not? Would a single moderator ever again have the latitude to press leaders who attempted to provide partial or evasive answers, as Stéphan Bureau and Steve Paikin did in some of the best debates of the past, or would the whole process become so earnest and cumbersome that any political leader worth her salt could effortlessly run rings around it?

The variety of the 2015 debates was a feature, not a bug. Interesting questions were asked. Should Elizabeth May or Gilles Duceppe participate? Should there be an audience in the room? Should there be one subject area or a broad selection of topics? Those questions received different answers from different organizers. Crucially, leaders were robbed of a chance to spend months learning how to beat the format, because they could not know which format to expect.

Variety and surprise are valuable in debates, too, because, Lord knows, life always delivers plenty of both to our elected leaders. I would argue strongly against any future in which the only debates that get broadcast are those designed by a debate commission or by its designated host network. There must be some provision for novel and unorthodox proposals to become reality. A commission could help some of those proposals along by declaring some debates, designed by outside proponents, a “must carry” on traditional broadcast networks, and by declaring them a “must attend” by political leaders. Good luck enforcing the latter provision, though. The stakes in a campaign are so high that, frankly, leaders will do what they believe is in their interests, as all of them always have.

Whatever you recommend, please favour lighter structures over heavier, more flexibility over less. Campaign techniques and the media environment are changing rapidly. If campaign debates become the only element of the modern campaign that doesn't change, then party strategists will quickly learn how to short-circuit them or hot-wire them to their own partisan advantage.

I look forward to hearing from the other panellists and your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Wells. We appreciate your experience.

Just for some of the panellists who have joined, there was a vote in the House that truncated this session, so we've put all the panellists together on one panel, and that's why you're here now. We'll be coming to your statements shortly.

We will now go to Professor Raynauld, who joins us from Boston.

• (1155)

Mr. Vincent Raynauld (Assistant Professor, Emerson College; Affiliate Professor, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and honourable members of the committee, for inviting me to appear today.

[*Translation*]

I would like to thank the chair, as well as the distinguished members of the committee for inviting me to take part in their work today.

Despite being based at Emerson College in Boston since August 2014, I am a Canadian citizen who completed my master's studies at the information and communication department, Université Laval, and his Ph.D. studies at Carleton University's School of Journalism and Communication, not too far from where you are today.

My research interests lie at the intersection of political communication, journalism, social media, and electoral campaigning. In recent years, my research activities have led me to take a closer look at the format of election debates during elections.

[*English*]

Since the first televised leaders' debate during the 1968 Canadian federal elections, televised debates have become a pivotal moment for campaigns in Canada. On the one hand, debates provide political party leaders with a unique opportunity to reach out to and connect with a large portion of the electorate in both official languages. They enable them to make their positions on various political issues heard. On the other hand, they represent an important source of information for members of the public. They allow them to get more details about the electoral issues and to compare and contrast the positions of party leaders. Some leaders' debates are a one-stop shop for voters to get information and make up their minds for election day.

Several academic studies, some older and some more recent, have confirmed the impact of leaders' debates on the public's attitudes, levels of mobilization, and voting intentions. Despite in-depth changes in the expansion and diversification of the media environment, as well as the rise of new generations of citizens with different preferences during the last 50 years, the format and mechanics of leaders' debates have remained largely unchanged. Also, the viewership of leaders' debates has progressively declined during this time. In fact, the leaders' debates during the 2015 Canadian federal elections had a very low viewership compared with leaders' debates during past elections.

It should be noted that during this time period, the campaigning tactics deployed by political parties and candidates have also evolved significantly. This has obviously impacted how voters have access to information that can in some cases prove pivotal in their ability to choose a candidate to support on election day.

It is therefore possible to ask the following questions. Is the format of leaders' debates and the way they are organized still adapted to the current social, political, and media environment in Canada? Should it be reviewed in order to better serve Canadians?

While I don't have a silver bullet to answer these questions, I hope my remarks and my answers to your questions today can offer some food for thought, especially as you're considering the creation of an independent commissioner responsible for leaders' debates.

I can tell you that, first, younger adults are flocking to social media to acquire and share information about politics as well as to engage in political discussions with their peers. This dynamic is particularly prevalent on the night of leaders' debates, a phenomenon known as dual screening. A growing number of viewers are following the live broadcast of the debate on the TV screen while sharing insights as well as interacting with their peers on social media through their computer or mobile device such as a tablet or a smart phone. Leaders have also embraced this dynamic. For example, the leader of the Green Party of Canada, Elizabeth May, who was not included in the leaders' debate during the 2015 federal election, turned to Twitter to broadcast her views as well as share her thoughts on the position of other party leaders during the debate. In sum, it can be argued that the dual-screening dynamic is leading to a situation where there is a debate between political candidates on the TV screen and a larger, more decentralized public debate online.

Second, recent decades have been marked by the rise of a generation of citizens with a new set of preferences, interests, and objectives. It is possible to question whether these citizens are adequately served by the more traditional patterns of political communication, including leaders' debates during campaigns, as well as the structure of what we consider to be mainstream political discourse. In other words, are leaders' debates serving their needs and wants adequately? Are they contributing to making citizens less interested and engaged in the formal political process?

• (1200)

I believe that while leaders' debates still represent a vital aspect of election campaigns, and to some degree democratic life in Canada, their format and the way in which they are organized is no longer adapted to the current social, political, and media environment in Canada. More importantly, the situation described earlier in my opening remarks represents, in my opinion, one dimension of a broader debate about the growing disconnect between political elites and members of civil society in Canada. It should be noted that some politicians have deployed efforts in order to address this situation and reshape the way in which they reach out to, and engage with, members of the public.

I suspect that the creation of an independent commissioner responsible for leaders' debates, or institutionalizing the organization of leaders' debates, would be beneficial in addressing some of these concerns and those raised by others who will be appearing in front of the committee. I am unsure that media organizations are in the best position to effect change that would be beneficial to the public and democratic life in Canada. The independent commissioner could act as a neutral arbitrator who could take into account the wants and needs of all players in the context of leaders' debates in Canada: political parties and candidates, media organizations that broadcast the debates, and members of the public. In other words, an independent commissioner could provide a vision that would ensure that leaders' debates are adapted to the current and future social, political, and media environment in Canada.

Mr. Chair, and honourable members of the committee, I hope my appearance will be beneficial to your work. I want to thank you again for inviting me today. Please note that I stand ready to answer any questions you may have, in both official languages.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chair, distinguished members of the committee, I hope my participation will be helpful to you in your work.

Thank you for the invitation to join you today and I am available to answer your questions in both official languages.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Raynauld.

[*English*]

Before we go to Professor Giasson, I want to remind members that at four o'clock tomorrow, in room 112-N, we have the Ghana meeting. There's a document coming to you on that.

[*Translation*]

We will now hear from Mr. Giasson, from Université Laval.

Mr. Thierry Giasson (Full Professor, Département de science politique, Université Laval, As an Individual): Hello, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the members of the committee for inviting me.

I would also like to say hello to my colleagues, Mr. Raynauld, Mr. Cameron and Mr. Marland. I am pleased to share this time with them.

My name is Thierry Giasson. I am a full professor in the political science department at Université Laval. I am also the director of the political communication research group and a member of the Centre for the Study of Democratic Citizenship.

I would like first to thank you for this invitation to share some of my thoughts on the organization of leaders' debates, as part of your consideration of the Prime Minister Trudeau's proposal to create an independent commissioner responsible for leaders' debates.

I have also reviewed the testimony of the witnesses who have appeared before you since November 21 and certain documents to which you have access, such as the summary report of the colloquium on the future of televised debates, which was organized in 2015 by the Institute for Research on Public Policy, or IRPP, and Carleton University, as well as the study by the Library of Parliament's parliamentary information and research service on the organization of leaders' debates in other democracies.

So as not to repeat information you have already heard, I will focus on the objective which, in my opinion, should guide the organization of leaders' debates during elections in Canada. My presentation will be in three parts.

First, I will explain the role of a leaders' debate during an election. I will present the objective, in keeping with this role, that should guide the organization and the broadcast of a debate. Third, I will outline the competing interests that make it more difficult to achieve this objective given the way debates are currently organized, which is through negotiation behind closed doors between the media and the political parties.

Finally, I will mention the aspects of the context which, in my opinion, should guide the committee's reflections on creating the position of independent commissioner responsible for organizing leaders' debates.

What purpose does a leaders' debate serve in an election? Research on these broadcasts show that the role of televised debates in a democracy is to give undecided voters an opportunity to compare the positions of the main political parties vying for office on the key issues for society at the time of the election.

The broadcast gives citizens simultaneous access to the parties' platforms on the issues and, importantly, to the type of leadership offered by each party leader taking part in the broadcast.

This gives citizens access to two kinds of electoral information, presented to them in summary and comparatively. The role of a leaders' debate is therefore above all to provide information. The purpose of the broadcast is to offer, to the citizens who need it, information that is easy to access, diverse, and transparent, and is therefore of great added value and will be useful in making a decision in the election.

The debate therefore plays a key role in democratic life since it is the only communication format that offers citizens this unique context of election information. In watching leaders' debates, citizens expend a modest if not minimum effort in return for information that can be very important to them.

This naturally leads to the second part of my presentation, which is to identify the objective that should guide the organization of leaders' debates in Canada. The mission that, in my opinion, should guide the organization of a leaders' debate is providing information, which is a crucial role in democratic elections.

As I said earlier, the leaders' debate program offers added value, as compared to other communication and information formats, that citizens cannot find anywhere else. The objective should therefore be to develop a program that serves this essential purpose of providing information, that serves citizens, and that facilitates their election decisions.

I will say this later on, but, in my opinion, the leaders' debate is first and foremost for citizens and democracy. In my opinion, this principle calls for the establishment of a more transparent and independent process that is free of special interests, and that upholds this basic principle. I would also note that the way leaders' debates are organized currently, with the content and format of the broadcast being negotiated behind closed doors by the media and the political parties, could compromise this objective since the required partners at the bargaining table come with their own strategic priorities.

In what way could these objectives differ? On the one hand, the media seem to regard the debate as an exercise in journalism that promotes their role as gatekeepers of public information and holding political actors to account. Moreover, the IRPP summary report shows that this perception was very prevalent in discussions among the media representatives who took part in the colloquium.

The media are also businesses that are subject to economic imperatives, which means that their production has to draw big audiences in order to be profitable.

●(1205)

This pressure leads organizations to give preference to broadcast formats featuring confrontation, spectacle, and drama. This is in fact what the TVA network said when it left the broadcasters' consortium

in order to produce leaders' debates that would be like a duel, offering viewers exchanges deemed to be more intense and entertaining.

While entertaining, such theatrics dominated by confrontation might not meet the objective of offering citizens election information that has added value. Moreover, they limit citizens' access to a range of political views, since there are just two opposing viewpoints in a duel.

The media interest in producing a good television show—or simply a good show, since the debate can be seen on various platforms—might not serve citizens' need to obtain diverse, concise and useful information.

Moreover, as we saw in 2015, among other things, holding multiple debates reduces their significance among the electorate. Citizens' interest is diluted when too many debates are held, since their need for information decreases as the campaign progresses.

Holding multiple debates therefore serves no purpose since the potential viewership declines as the campaign progresses. It is nonetheless honourable for party leaders to agree, as they did in 2015, to take part in a number of thematic debates, but I think at least one debate should be held in each official language that includes all the leaders of the main political parties in a campaign.

The political parties are the other group of actors in the negotiations. They have their own strategic interests. Their main objective is to present their platforms to specific electors, while limiting the risk of missteps.

The obsession with strategy will lead politicians to give a very calculated, careful, and repetitive performance, that will sometimes lack authenticity or depth, and that citizens might not view favourably. These strategic interests also lead certain parties to refuse to take part in the debates, as the Conservative Party of Canada refused to take part in the English debate organized by the media consortium in 2015.

It is perfectly normal for political parties to have strategic objectives for their participation in the leaders' debate. It is more difficult to accept that these parties and their leaders should refuse to stand before Canadians to present their platform, defend their record, and answer questions on the issues of public concern when the election is called.

Finally, I will conclude by highlighting certain aspects that I believe should guide your reflections on creating the position of independent commissioner responsible for leaders' debates.

First, I think any attempt to reform the organization of leaders' debates should above all be guided by the interest of citizens, since they are the key players in Canada's democratic process.

Any type of reform should focus on recognizing this principle and the need of citizens during an election period for diverse, transparent, and useful information for their decision. The leaders' debate does not belong to the media or to the political parties. It belongs instead to citizens and to Canadian democracy. This reality should guide any reforms, in my opinion.

I think reforming the organization of debates is important in order to reestablish the importance of these election communication activities during elections in Canada. Many voters still need them to make an informed decision, as seen by the audience size, which was still quite large for the debates in 2015, in spite of everything.

Canada's hybrid media landscape does mean, however, that these debates will have to be broadcast on multiple media platforms. As Mr. Raynauld said, they will be consumed on multiple media platforms.

They must also be organized in accordance with the objective of giving undecided voters an election program during which the main party leaders speak up for their record and policy positions to the Canadian public.

I also think the debates should be organized by someone who is independent of the media and of the political parties in order to limit the negative impact of strategic and business interests on the democratic role of debates.

I am not sure, however, that creating the new position of independent commissioner for the organization of leaders' debates is the way to go about this reform. Existing organizations already have resources that could do the coordination work of organizing debates. Off the top of my head, there is the broadcasting arbitrator, who is responsible for allocating free broadcasting time among the political parties as elections approach.

Although temporary at this time, this position could be made permanent and include broader responsibilities, including the organization of debates, as well as perhaps monitoring the advertising activities of political parties outside official election periods.

• (1210)

If I may, Mr. Chair, I would like to conclude my remarks with a warning.

Your proposals will be evaluated by the Canadian people who, as numerous studies over more than 20 years have confirmed, are sceptical and suspicious of the political class.

There is democratic malaise in Canada and the government's recent failures to make democratic reforms might make some Canadians more sensitive in their perceptions of their political leaders. They have big expectations, but increasingly they are being disappointed. In my opinion, it would be wise not to disappoint them again.

Thank you very much for the time you have allowed me. I will be pleased to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Giasson.

[English]

Now we have Professor Marland, from Memorial University in Newfoundland.

Dr. Alex Marland (Professor, Department of Political Science, Memorial University of Newfoundland, As an Individual): I want to thank the committee for inviting me to speak. I have to say I'm envious of what you're doing. Legislative committees are an essential role in our parliamentary system, and I really want to thank everyone for their service.

Just to situate my ability to offer comment, committee members should be aware that my area of research is Canadian political communication and political marketing. I also study how political strategists are engaged in media management and message coordination. Generally speaking, my approach is non-partisan, and I try to balance all available perspectives when arriving at an informed assessment of a situation.

I want to start by affirming that in my opinion, it's reasonable to create an independent commissioner to organize party leaders' debates. I appreciate that the negotiations with the broadcast consortium can be challenging, and as others have pointed out, the ways of communicating with Canadians are evolving. To me, a debate about debates takes away from attention that should be paid to public policy. However, I don't think we should be fooled; strategic games are not going to vanish by the creation of an individual or any particular commissioner—

• (1215)

The Clerk: Professor Marland, it appears we have a fire alarm going off here, as though things couldn't get any worse. We'll have to suspend and we'll come back.

• (1215)

(Pause)

• (1245)

The Chair: We're going to continue with Professor Marland.

It will be okay if you talk quickly, because we have such a short time. Do your best.

We're looking forward to hearing from you.

Dr. Alex Marland: I'll just pick up on what I was saying about how a debate about debates takes away attention that should be paid to public policy.

Really, one of the messages I'd like to convey is that we shouldn't be thinking that strategic games would magically vanish. With any such commissioner, we have to be concerned about how that person is appointed, and we have to be sure the person is truly independent. Finding a way to ensure that all political parties support that person's appointment must be sacrosanct. If we don't do that, what will happen is that in the heat of an election campaign, a political party will be prone to deriding the office of the commissioner and perhaps even the individual appointee. They will use that individual's alleged partisanship as a reason for delegitimizing the entire debate process. The political strategists and leaders who avoid complaining about the broadcast consortium or about the media might be comfortable complaining about someone they perceive to be a political appointee.

This brings me to my main opinion that I wish to relay to the committee: the proposed focus on leaders' debates is too narrow. It's well intentioned, but it is problematic for reasons I'm going to explain.

I believe the scope of the position needs to be broadened. To me, the position should remove the word "leaders". This would produce some important changes that would have positive reverberations across our political system. A lot of scholars, including me, have raised concern about the excessive focus on party leaders in Canada. Media attention increases the power of the leadership circle and diminishes the influence of those outside the inner circle. The trend in intensifying the concentration of power in the so-called "centre" is often traced back to the 1970s. Since then, leaders' debates have been the focal point of election campaigns. Political strategists refer to the pre-debate period as the "phony war", because up to that point, many people aren't paying attention.

It isn't as though there is much in the way of policy discussion drawn from the debates. The media looks for a knockout punch, and instantly judges who won and who lost. Then it moves on to following the leaders' tour. As well, research shows that the leaders' debates are mostly a media spectacle, rather than a civic education function. What many people learn is high level. Research shows that opinion formulation can be as limited as forming a judgment on the basis of candidates' mannerisms.

What matters, and what I'm concerned about, is that the leaders' debates place such an intense media glare on the leaders. This has a ripple effect throughout the entire campaign and into governance. In my view, you have an opportunity to do something about it. By referring to an "independent commissioner to organize party leaders' debates", Parliament would be further formalizing the power and authority of the leaders. It's the kind of thing that goes against the spirit of the Reform Act that was passed by Parliament in 2015. I believe that the word "leaders" should be removed from the proposed position.

Calling the position "the independent commissioner to organize political party debates" would reduce the emphasis on party leaders. It would provide flexibility to broaden the commission or the commissioner's mandate. This could potentially lead to a much-needed and helpful organizational resource for constituency campaigns, where so many debates among candidates are held. The commissioner could and should provide guidelines and best practices for organizing debates in Canada's 338 electoral districts. After all, this is where candidates are running for whom Canadians can actually vote directly. Local media is also in flux.

Moreover, national level debates can and should emphasize the party as a team, rather than the leader as an individual. Removing the word "leader" could create opportunities for national level debates that include candidates that the leader believes are suitable for cabinet. The narrow nature of the word "leader" in the position reasonably precludes such opportunities.

The last point I'll make is that the more the institutional roles and processes emphasize the party leader, the more party election candidates, backbench MPs, and even ministers become political nobodies off of Parliament Hill. We need to find opportunities to level the playing field. An independent commissioner to organize

debates for party leaders treats our parliamentary system as a presidential system. We should not entrench that further.

• (1250)

This committee and Parliament has an opportunity to do something about the perceived concentration of power in a political party's leadership circle. Please consider removing the word "leader" from the proposed position title.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that interesting perspective.

Now we'll go to Professor Cameron at UBC.

Professor Maxwell A. Cameron (Professor, Department of Political Science, University of British Columbia, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to appear before this committee. I'm really delighted and I'd like to express my strong support for the initiative to create a commission or a commissioner responsible for federal party debates.

I think the status quo is problematic in a number of important respects. The main concern that I would like to focus on is the lack of transparency, accountability, and public engagement in the organization of the debates. Although political debates are an important part of our democracy, the way we organize them isn't particularly democratic.

I think that the creation of a commission or a commissioner could provide an opportunity for more meaningful public engagement and deliberation in our election campaigns. Improvements could be made not only in the form and content of debates, but also in the process by which they are organized.

A commission or a commissioner could provide the opportunity to include a broader spectrum of voices from Canadian society, including first nations, youth, women, and minorities.

More importantly, in my view, it would create an opportunity to counteract the fragmentation in our public life, which I believe is beginning to tear at the fabric of our democracy. I think we're only beginning to see this fragmentation that's under way.

More and more, Canadians are getting their news content from social media platforms that divide us into smaller and smaller publics rather than binding us together into one. Political debates are one of the relatively few moments when the whole public can come together and engage in a common activity.

I believe it's important to do everything we can to encourage a flourishing public life, and for that, we need more opportunities to have dialogue, deliberation, and the engagement of the public in our politics.

This is one of the reasons that in recent years at UBC my colleagues and I at the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions have created a school for politicians. We organize what's called the Summer Institute for Future Legislators. It's a program that's designed to foster the kinds of skills and knowledge that we need to be good citizens or to be good statespersons.

One of the things that our participants learn to do is how to debate. They engage in question period, but they also participate in caucus meetings. They organize committee meetings and they meet with and hear from witnesses. They craft legislation. They debate it at first and second readings.

One of the things that's really fascinating about watching the participants in this program is how quickly they're gripped by the spirit of teamwork and partisanship. At the same time, when they come into the activity, as I think most people do when they enter public life, it's in a spirit of interest in public service, a desire to find and to serve the public good. We watch them struggle to balance these competing goals. That's what politics is really all about. That's what citizenship is about.

I think that we need opportunities for people to learn and to cultivate these skills. Unfortunately, there are too few opportunities for citizens to acquire these skills, the knowledge that they need to deliberate, to compromise, to balance goods and to make collective decisions. These aren't things that you learn from a textbook. You don't learn them by studying political science. You learn them by doing.

I think debates provide a marvellous opportunity to cultivate citizenship, but to serve that purpose, debates should not be monopolized by the media and political parties. I don't mean to suggest for a minute that political parties and the media are not crucial; what they bring to the table is central to what debates are all about and they have a critical role to play in their organization.

• (1255)

I'm suggesting that should be balanced against the involvement of civil society to ensure the debates don't simply create an entertaining spectacle and don't simply serve partisan interests, but that they also promote active, engaged, and informed citizenship. I think we can imagine a number of ways in which debates could be organized so that their form and content better serve the public interest than our current system does.

Very briefly, let me suggest a few of the ideas that I think might serve this purpose. In the first place, I think a commission or commissioner might well have an advisory body that would reflect Canada's diversity. A commission or commissioner could be empowered to place the organization of the debates in the hands of an independent body that would include, in addition to representatives of parties and the media, citizens, civil society groups, and universities. I believe that universities have a potentially important role to play, given that they exist across our country and have deep connections with civil society. I would suggest that the organization of debates should probably not be placed in the hands of Elections Canada, because I think it's important that it stands above the fray.

The organization of debates should involve open and transparent public engagement to ensure that decisions such as who participates, what kinds of questions are asked, the format, and other matters, reflect the broadest public interest. I also agree with some of the things that have been said by previous speakers, that in the spirit of our Westminster system, debates among party leaders should be complemented by debates in ridings across the country, as well as debates on specific topics involving parliamentarians who are not necessarily party leaders. These debates could be easily taped and stored on a publicly available website for all to watch.

Finally, and perhaps most ambitiously, the public should be encouraged to participate in debates, holding their own local face-to-face meetings in smaller groups or medium-sized assemblies. This could be done by introducing what political scientists Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin have called a deliberation day, a national holiday held a couple of weeks before the election itself, in which all citizens would be encouraged to take time out to meet with their neighbours, organize activities, and debate for themselves the great issues that the country faces during an election.

Many of these ideas have been articulated in other contexts. There has been some very good work done by my colleague Taylor Owen, and Ruyard Griffiths, on this a number of years back, and I think it would be worthwhile to build on that work.

Needless to say, an ambitious agenda to democratize debates would take some time to develop, but I think that creating an independent commission or commissioner would be an excellent first step.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor Cameron.

We have 15 minutes left, so we'll have five minutes for each party, one questioner. You could share your time.

We'll start with Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.): I'm going to try to share my time.

I'll make this very quick. I have an overall question for all our guests.

First of all, thank you for your time.

It seems to me that the proliferation of ways of accessing the latest debates in so many platforms now has basically turned a lot of these debates into single-issue debates as such. As Mr. Wells pointed out, the opportunity is there because the expense of putting this together has collapsed, to the point where anybody can do it. You can have a large studio in a major city with all the broadcast cameras, or you can do it through Facebook in some shed in rural Newfoundland, and it would be sort of the same thing—not that I'm opposed to that.

My question boils down to this, though. With regard to the commission or commissioner, I appreciate that the independence of such has to be tantamount. I get that. But in the process of doing their job, would you be more in favour of a commission or commissioner sanctioning one or two debates—both languages—on a larger scale, for all platforms to plug into, or should the commission or commissioner be in charge of allowing a proposal to come in on several types of debates on different platforms, maybe even a single issue one? In other words, it would be their sanction of this that gives it some credence.

Why don't we go in order of appearance. Mr. Wells.

• (1300)

Mr. Paul Wells: My strong preference is for a variety of leaders' debates in each campaign. We have to look at the real world. The more debates that are organized by an independent commissioner, the higher the likelihood that one or more leaders will decide not to show up for some and indeed to flout whatever sanctions might be levied against them. The fewer debates that are organized, the higher the likelihood that some cheeky news outlet like *Macleans* is going to reach out to the party leaders anyway and say "Let's have our own debate."

Unless a debate commissioner is going to forbid participation in non-sanctioned debates, then I say that sort of event, let's just have a debate, let's just talk.... Say, the Liberal leader and the NDP leader have a grudge against each other and *The Globe and Mail* or *La Presse* or the University of Toronto says "Let's just have a debate between the two of you." I think the likelihood of that happening rises to a near certainty.

Mr. Scott Simms: Monsieur Raynauld.

Mr. Vincent Raynauld: I think there are two ways to look at the issue. First of all, it's been proven that people pay less and less attention or the attention span as well is less, and less time is devoted to these types of exercises. On the one hand, obviously organizing a large number of debates would have an impact on the ability of people to see all these debates to be aware of what's happening. On the other hand, and I think that point was raised by some of my colleagues, it's important to flag this sort of fragmentation of the public and have everybody plug into one or two major debates to have people be aware of a broad spectrum of issues.

It's hard to provide you with a yes or no answer to your question, but I think a couple of components need to be kept in mind. I'm sure that my colleagues will be able to provide additional insights.

Mr. Scott Simms: Professor Marland.

Dr. Alex Marland: The more debates you have, the less attention will be paid to the debates, because instead of focusing events that everybody is looking at, all of a sudden, another debate is occurring.

How do you reasonably control what's going on? I think what Mr. Wells said is absolutely right. You're just going to constantly have all this bickering occurring about what is and isn't sanctioned. I think the idea of a commissioner providing guidelines and best practices might be useful in many instances.

Mr. Scott Simms: Monsieur Giasson.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thierry Giasson: I do not think they are mutually exclusive. The commissioner, if that position is ever created, could be responsible for organizing two official debates among the main party leaders at the time of the election. That would not prevent media organizations from organizing other debates, after negotiating with the political parties.

We must ensure that at least two focal points in the campaign are organized in a transparent way in order to allow for a plurality of partisan views to be expressed. Citizens need that.

As I said earlier, thematic debates are fine, but once again I think it is important for citizens to have this opportunity for comparison and evaluation...

• (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair: Sorry, we're in a rush here.

Mr. Cameron, briefly, and then we'll go on to the next questioner.

Prof. Maxwell A. Cameron: I believe that it's not an either-or question. I think there should be a hierarchy of debates. When Canadians vote, they vote because they care about issues. They care about their region, their city, their province, and they're interested in the leaders. It seems to me that it's appropriate to have a major debate among the people who want to be the prime minister and to have other debates within ridings or debates on specific issues.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's great to be back here with some old friends, and I do appreciate this conversation. It's very near and dear to my heart. I got here and heard the topic. I'm quite surprised at the fact that we were talking possibly about a commissioner, a tentacle of government, to oversee potential debates. I find this quite shocking.

Maybe I can get a quick comment, a yes or no answer from each of the panellists here. It's my understanding, based on testimony that the minister gave at a previous committee, that the minister would not commit to all-party support for this commission or commissioner or however you want to call it.

I'll start with Mr. Wells because I can see him.

Mr. Paul Wells: The question is, should the commissioner get all-party support?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: That's correct.

Mr. Paul Wells: I view the commissioner as a rough equivalent to an officer of Parliament, and I think merely consulting would not be enough. I think there should be some level of consensus reached around.... You're nominating a person who would normally hold that office when the party currently in power is no longer in power. That sometimes happens in this country.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I don't know who's next.

Mr. Raynauld.

Mr. Vincent Raynauld: It's a tough question to answer, obviously. The key here is that the commission needs to remain independent, and oftentimes it's hard to achieve full support when you're independent.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Mr. Cameron.

Prof. Maxwell A. Cameron: Well, if the fundamental interest here is democracy and the public good, then no, I don't believe that any one party should have a veto over that. Of course I think it's critical that such a role, which would be, as Mr. Wells just said, like an officer of Parliament, command the broadest possible support, so I think it would be very important to try to find as much agreement across parties as possible.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Monsieur Giasson.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry Giasson: I agree with Mr. Cameron.

[English]

Mr. Scott Reid: If you have a second, could I ask a question?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Yes, sure.

Mr. Scott Reid: I just want to ask this question. I think we're almost out of time. I'll direct it to Mr. Wells.

We try to make officers of Parliament independent of any individual party's interest by saying that they are answering to the House of Commons, which means, in practice, they are answering to the parties that are in the House of Commons. My experience here in the House of Commons, in watching over the past two decades, is that the parties represented in the House can want to freeze out other parties.

We saw an electoral law passed and then struck down by the Supreme Court, which would have limited funding for parties not yet represented in the House. I worry that the same thing could happen with exclusion of new or insurgent parties, as the Reform Party, of which I was once a member, once was. Is that not a danger with the commission model?

Mr. Paul Wells: It sure is. I'm not going to solve that conundrum for you. I'm glad this committee is taking some time to ponder questions like that.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: That's similar to my concern. Once government gets hold of something, it usually grows. It doesn't shrink.

Maybe, Mr. Wells, I could quickly ask something. I know time is running short. Was the feed that *Maclean's* had during the last leaders' debate in the 2015 election offered to other broadcast networks?

Mr. Paul Wells: It was. I made it my business, because I was trying to get ready to moderate a debate, which was essentially a journalistic job. I didn't pay close attention to those discussions. My understanding is that Rogers offered the feed to other broadcasters for the kind of fee that is normally charged for that service. It's a fee at a level that broadcast networks could easily afford. The broadcast networks said, "No, thank you." Their public explanation for doing that was that they had no control over the content, and they had no

guarantee that we were going to deliver a proper debate to them, and they didn't want to broadcast crap to their audiences.

My personal preference would have been that we offer the feed for free. My personal preference would have been that all of these networks on which I have appeared would understand that I would do good work. I'd also see a potential role for the debate commissioner as vetting independent proposals and declaring that this and this and this proposed debate run by outside groups rise to a certain level of quality, and therefore the commissioner declares these debates a "must carry"—but that's one idea among many.

• (1310)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: To your understanding, the only condition was a small fee to the other networks, and they said, "No, thanks." That's to your understanding.

Mr. Paul Wells: Yes. I stand to be corrected by the broadcast networks, but that is what I learned.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay.

Mr. Wells, do you see possibly, instead of letting the markets and the network decide how best to work, that this is another step in government overreach in terms of a potential commissioner? How do you see this playing out?

Mr. Paul Wells: I think it's legitimate for the state to have an interest in this element of campaigns, as it has an interest in so many other elements of campaigns. I think it's really hard to do it in such a way that things improve.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: That would be hard, yes.

Mr. Paul Wells: I've heard people refer to the presidential debate commission in the United States as a model. I would urge this committee to actually study how the presidential debate commission works. It's a farce. It's a racket by the old-line parties to ensure their monopoly over the White House, or their duopoly over the White House. There's a reason that no candidate from a third party has come close to getting elected in a century. The presidential debate commission is not foreign to that outcome.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Christopherson has agreed to give up his time to discuss his motion.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for coming today. I'm sorry for the fire alarm and the vote that took up some of the time, but you provided some very sage advice and we got all your presentations in, which is the important thing. People can of course contact you individually if they have further questions.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry Giasson: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, do you want to present your revised motion? We only have about five minutes. We'll see if we can get started, at least.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): When you informed me we weren't going to get to this today, I didn't want to delay, so I've given up my time in the rotation to move this.

I'll read the amended motion. By the way, the formulary part is taken directly from the discussions that PROC had on BOIE. I just transposed the particulars. It reads as follows:

That, in relation to its study on the creation of an independent commissioner responsible for leaders' debates, the Committee allow one Member who is not a member of a recognized party to participate in the hearings in a temporary, non-voting capacity when it is conducting the study, and that the Member be allowed 5 minutes during the second round of questions in which to address witnesses.

Again, this is what we did when we were studying BOIE and we wanted to make sure that everybody had a say since everyone was impacted and committee, you asked me to go back and bring language, so I've done that, Chair. I put this in front of the committee, and hopefully we can support it.

The Chair: Is there any discussion?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): I support it.

The Chair: While people are discussing, I'm going to ask you some questions.

How will the independents be organized? Will they be allowed at in camera meetings? Will they be discussing the draft report? Would they be provided all documents from the committee?

Mr. David Christopherson: My first response would be, if there are answers to how we answered those questions vis-à-vis BOIE, I would say the same.

The Chair: Scott, do you have any input?

Mr. Scott Reid: We're just trying to figure it out right now. A change was made, and what we're looking at is not what was discussed. What was the change?

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Would this just tack on five minutes to each meeting?

The Chair: Five minutes in the second round for that person.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: In addition to everything that we already have, so no one's losing time.

Mr. Scott Reid: Would our meetings last until five minutes later than the current end time? They wouldn't wrap at 1:00; they'd wrap up at 1:05. Or are we taking the time out of something else?

• (1315)

The Chair: That's a question for the committee. Will we just reduce the time of the questions and answers or do we go to 1:05, five minutes later?

Mr. David Christopherson: Do we use up all the time when we do rotation? I think we usually have time left over.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: We sometimes lose the three-minute rounds.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You lose 10, usually.

The Chair: David, is the five minutes you're proposing at the beginning or at the end of the second round? Where is it in the second round?

Mr. David Christopherson: Again, I'm not married to this. I just tried to find something that was fair, and the rules that we had under BOIE must have been fair because they were approved by everybody. I don't care.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms: Could I propose that it be top of the second round?

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Scott Reid: May I make a suggestion here?

Given the time, would it not seem unreasonable that we discuss this among ourselves? It sounds as if there's a broad willingness to go with something like this, but the details need to be hammered out where we can do it—

Mr. David Christopherson: I gave up my time for nothing.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm just suggesting that. I'm not trying to be... you'll be quiet for a second and we'll see if you get a resolution and then we won't have to do it. We'll come back on Thursday with an agreement.

The Chair: Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms: We're not analyzing the Magna Carta here. I think it's pretty explicit as to what it wants to do. I think we've already had one discussion about it. We were asked to have a good think for ourselves and come back and talk about it once more. I agree. I like it. I think it should be at the top of the second round. If that requires an amendment or whatever it may be, I'm willing to do that. I don't know what the concern is.

Mr. Scott Reid: Why don't you make that amendment? Then we'll be discussing it? Does that make sense? Why don't you propose that amendment?

Mr. Scott Simms: Here's my thing, if I may, Chair.

I don't know if it requires an amendment. Does it? If this carries, then you can slip it in wherever you wish. The instruction is to give that person the five minutes within our time. I'm only suggesting putting it at the top of the second round. If there is to be an amendment, I'll gladly put one forward.

The Chair: David.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: To solve this problem, I suggest we shave one minute off each of the seven-minute rounds in the first round and give those minutes to the independent round. If they're present, we do this. If they're not, we don't. Between the first and second rounds, the problem is solved. It doesn't add any time to the meeting—it adds one minute—and we only give that minute each to them if they come.

Mr. David Christopherson: Except you're asking me to pay the biggest price.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: The Liberals lose two minutes—

Mr. David Christopherson: No, no, but overall I have less time.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham:—you each lose one, and we give five to them. There's one minute at the end.

Mr. David Christopherson: You said two minutes from the government?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You still get your second round, because we're taking time out of the first set.

Mr. David Christopherson: No, I'm just saying that one minute off seven means more to me than you.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Can I suggest an alternative here? I'm actually going to propose it as an amendment just so we have a formal way of either agreeing to it or dismissing it and moving back to what's being suggested here. The amendment I propose is that a comma be added to the end of what's written here and these words added: "provided that the meeting be extended by an additional five minutes for each panel of witnesses".

Mr. David Christopherson: That would be the easiest. I would prefer that.

Mr. Scott Reid: Would that be okay with people?

Mr. David Christopherson: That way nobody loses anything and colleagues are gaining for the price of five minutes.

Mr. Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.): Is that per panel?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, it's per panel.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: So if there are two panels, it would be extended by 10 minutes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Should I read it again, Chris?

Mr. Chris Bittle: No, I heard it. I just wanted to know—

Mr. Scott Reid: It's per panel, yes. We would be wrapping up five or 10 minutes later.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: This all only applies if they actually come. Is that right?

The Chair: That's true.

With that amendment, is there any further discussion?

(Amendment agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

(Motion as amended agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: The independents will have to sort out amongst themselves who comes or who's allowed to come.

● (1320)

The Clerk: So I'll write to them all?

The Chair: Okay. Will you explain that to them?

The Clerk: Yes.

The Chair: We'll bring back, where we can, the Board of Internal Economy rules on those other questions. If there are ones, we'll use them.

Is there anything else for the good of the nation?

Mr. Scott Reid: No, thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate how you always look over at me before you hit the gavel.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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