



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

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

---

PROC • NUMBER 086 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

---

**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, January 30, 2018**

—  
**Chair**

**The Honourable Larry Bagnell**



## Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Tuesday, January 30, 2018

• (1100)

[English]

**The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)):** We'll start the new year on time for once and see how that goes.

Good morning and welcome to the 86th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, the first meeting of 2018.

Today, as we continue our study on the creation of an independent commissioner responsible for leaders' debates, we're going to hear from the Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission in the first hour and the Jamaica Debates Commission in the second hour.

By video conference from Trinidad and Tobago, we are pleased to be joined by Catherine Kumar, interim chief executive officer; and then Angella Persad, immediate past chair.

Thank you both for appearing today.

I'll now turn the floor over to Ms. Kumar for her opening statement.

**Ms. Catherine Kumar (Interim Chief Executive Officer, Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission):** Thank you very much, Chair, honourable Member Bagnell. It is indeed our pleasure to be here this morning to be able to present our lived experiences from the centre for the debates commission. You have already introduced Angella Persad, who will also be appearing with me during the Q and A questions, and I will just let you know that our current chair is Mr. Nicholas Galt, but he only recently took up the position, and we thought it would be better if Angella handled it.

I would also like to say thank you very much to Andrew. Andrew has been very efficient in handling the million and one questions that we asked. When Andrew first contacted me, I wondered why you would want to hear from a small, developing country like Trinidad and Tobago. That was a question I actually asked him, and then it made sense. We are a Commonwealth country. Our debates commission was already formed, and we realized that you can learn from anyone, small or large, as we all have our lessons we could learn, and we could move forward with that.

I'm really hoping that what we share with you will be good and will help you in some way. During the Q and A, I think, is where we will probably get out most of the questions and answers for you.

I think it's important for us to say a little bit about the political context within which the debates commission operates and how we

were born. We are a democratic society. We have elections every five years as mandated. We have election campaigns as do most other countries, and during the election campaigns, there is a lot of mudslinging and personalities bringing down each other, the kind of thing that does not in any way inform the electorate to help them make better decisions when casting their votes.

In Trinidad and Tobago in particular, it's quite a "rum and roti" environment. There's a lot of entertainment and music and so on going on during the campaigns. Wild promises are made, and there is no accountability afterwards. You can say anything you want in the campaign and there's no one afterwards to hold you accountable for that.

Trinidad and Tobago did not have leaders' debates before the debates commission was formed. As a matter of fact, they had no sort of debates. What you may have seen in the past would probably be media interviews with one of the leaders, but we never had anything where opposing leaders, prospective leaders, would get together and answer questions asked by an independent person. The whole issue of having any formal debating was definitely new to Trinidad and Tobago.

Another important thing is that in Trinidad and Tobago, we have no fixed dates for elections, and as in many other countries, including yours, where you don't have a fixed date now, it makes life very difficult for any debates' sponsor, because you really don't know when an election will be called. While from the legal point of view, the Parliament cannot sit for more than five years after the date of the first sitting, the PM could call elections any time before that and that, as I said, makes it very difficult for us.

The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce is really the one that started the debates commission. They felt, and so did others in Trinidad and Tobago, that we were not discussing the issues that were really important, the things that we should be considering when we cast our vote. We recognize that there will always be party loyalists, but the marginals are about 30%, so those are the ones that we need to work at and let them hear from the prospective leaders what they have to offer their country. Under the strategic pillar of governance, the Trinidad and Tobago chamber set up the debates commission.

We did something like you did, although not mandated by government in any way, so it was a totally independent initiative. We set up an interim committee and we started going about researching what other countries had done and what was the best way to achieve all mandates. Through that we interacted with the U.S. debates commission, AGG, the National Democratic Institute, and the Jamaican-based commission, because Jamaica was the only country in the Caribbean that had set up a debates commission already, and we got help from them about how they did theirs.

We did not consult the politicians in any way. Quite frankly we did not go to the people either, and I think that's a very good initiative, which I see your Minister of Democratic Institutions is doing. By going to the people, you can get better support afterwards, because you will have heard from them.

●(1105)

Those are things we could have probably done a little better, but certainly we recognized that we needed to do something.

This interim committee was set up in 2009, and then in 2010—even though five years had not passed—the Prime Minister pulled the dates out of his back pocket, as we say in Trinidad, and called the election. We were not ready at that time, so we hurriedly set up and registered ourselves as an NGO, an independent, autonomous organization not in any way legally connected to the chamber, even though the chamber gave us full support throughout the entire process. Independence was important for us, as was autonomy.

We did not have funding at that point in time from anyone, so again the chamber helped us there. That brought up a whole issue as to how independent we were, because if we had taken funding from the chamber... I was then CEO of the chamber, and I also led the debates commission. That's an issue we needed to look at, and we probably made a mistake there. When you say “independent”, you have to really ensure that the commission and the commissioners who are on it are truly independent.

We set the criteria for our commissioners. It was very important that they not be politically aligned in any way, and that they appear to be independent—not only say that they are, but appear to the public to be independent. We went about and quickly founded the debates commission. We had our values—democracy, transparency, objectivity, and independence—and we ensured that all our commissioners subscribed to them and signed on to that code.

In Trinidad and Tobago, our debates commission has no legal standing. It is not established in law. It is not established by any electoral mandate, or anything at all. It really relies totally on the support of the public and the people to demand a debate. This is something that is really very important. We are in the process of doing a strategic plan for the next three to four years, and one of the questions that we have on the table is whether we should also pursue putting some legislation in place whereby the leaders will have to debate. As I go on, you will see the difficulty we have had in having the leaders debate. Also, because we did not go to the people initially, I don't think we got the groundswell from the population to ensure that a debate would be held.

What we have is a group of independent organizations—religious, civic, and others—that got together and formed what is called a

“Code of Ethical Political Conduct”, and the political parties all signed on to that. In it, there is a clause that says the leaders must take part in the leaders' debate. However, at the time this was set up, which was really just in 2014, it only said a leaders' debate organized by a debates commission. Subsequent to the last elections in 2015, when we had difficulty in getting the leaders' debate off, we were able to convince them that we must have consistency in who organizes the debates. You cannot really have various bodies—one term it's this body and next term another body. We need a consistent approach and one organization that has rules. We got them to agree that it should be the Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission that will organize debates, and that was insisted. That has not been tested as yet, because we have not had elections since then, so we will see afterwards.

The consistency was important because during different periods in the last five years there have been other organizations that have been saying they would like to do leaders' debates. From the University of the West Indies, a group of youth wanted to do a debate. Again, it would start off and nothing would happen, so we really were convinced that a debates commission was the organization to do it.

We have set rules that have been laid down and agreed upon by all the commissioners. We also have rules for the commissioners themselves that they have to abide by.

●(1110)

For instance, the commissioners cannot attend political campaigns. Trinidad is a very small island of 1.3 million people, and if you go to a party's campaign someone is going to see you and come back and say afterwards that you are not really independent.

We also set rules and criteria for the leaders who will be participating in the debates. We felt that you must be contesting at least 50% of the seats that are up for voting, or you would have achieved at least a 12.5% positive polling in the last two polls. That latter proved to be a challenge for us because polling is not done on an everyday basis in Trinidad and Tobago, and we did not have polls done immediately before.

The 50% of the seats also posed a challenge because it has to be that these are parties that have said they will contest, and you will not know that for sure until nomination date. Nomination date is very close to the election, so you really negotiate with parties, not being 100% sure how many parties will be debating. You may be pretty sure about two parties because we are mainly a two-party system, but the others you would not know about.

We formulated an MOU for the parties to sign, again because we did not have any legislation. We did have the MOU signed by one party, not by all.

The debates commissioners are the ones who will choose the moderator and the questioners. We have had different types of debates. In one case we had one moderator who would moderate and ask the questions, and in other cases we've had a moderator who did strictly the presentation, and questioners who would ask the questions.

The debates commissioners are not involved in any way in coming up with the questions. That's strictly up to the moderator and the questioners. Through social media, we invite the public to send in their questions. We also get together with students to look at possible questions.

Financing is done strictly by corporate T and T—no government financing at all—because we have to maintain our independence. Corporate T and T has been very good so far in helping us with our debates.

We have held three debates so far, one in 2010 immediately as we formed in 2010. We did not get the leaders' debate after the general election but soon thereafter there were local government elections and we got a debate for that. Then in 2013 we had two debates and these were more or less national or provincial debates for Tobago, our sister island. We held a leaders' debate in Tobago and then we had another local government election debate.

We have not been successful in having any leaders' debates to date and that took us right back to the drawing board to ask why our lack of success. Besides the fact that it is not mandated, we really did not bring the media in early enough and the media is an integral party in having these debates. They're the ones we depend on to have their morning shows, all the talk shows, and the advertisements to get the public aware and talking about why we should have debates, and by political analysts to do the front sessions with them.

We did not have the voice of the people. That was not strong enough. I shouldn't say we did not have it because we did have a certain amount but the voice was not strong enough to demand a debate from the potential leaders.

In our strategic plan we are addressing them within a very strong relationship with the media, and directly with publishers and broadcasters. We are also getting the youth involved, getting more social media, and getting the people involved so we can have a stronger relationship with them through civic organizations and the like.

The debates are important to this country. We want to get involved in pre-elections, during elections, and post-elections, so we really want to be part of the entire governance process and these debates will not only be with the leaders. Some of them would probably be with other persons within the parties or political analysts or whoever we deem to be proper to handle that particular type of debate.

• (1115)

We are getting ready for 2020, our next general election, but prior to that we hope to have at least two debates so we can get the public involved, and when 2020 comes around they will be ready for us.

On behalf of the Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission, I again thank you for wanting to hear our views.

I will now turn it back to you, Chair, for the important Q and A part.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. As I said at the beginning, we really appreciate your taking this time for us.

In our Qs and As each party gets seven minutes to start out and that includes questions and answers.

We are starting with Mr. Graham, please.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.):** Thank you.

This is my first question. I'm a little unclear. You said that the parties have to sign a code of conduct that says they will participate in the debates. Then at the end of your comments you said you haven't actually had any debates yet. Can you bridge that gap for us?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** The code was developed in 2014 and at that time it just said they had to attend a leaders' debate organized by a debates commission, in other words, anyone. They had no success there actually, so subsequent to 2015 we got them to amend it to say that they must participate in debates organized by the Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission. Our name has been put into the code, but we have not been able to test that because that was only done subsequent to the last election.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** Were there any competing debates commissions that people tried to set up?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** No, there are no competing debates commissions. We've had ventures. There was a group at the University of the West Indies who tried to do a debate. They did not get very far toward even organizing it. They certainly never got to the point of calling the politicians. Then there was another youth group who tried also but again did not get very far.

Really since the entire talk about having debates, the Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission is the only one that has been consistently calling for the debates.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** You also said there is a criteria of 12.5%, but a quick look at the country says it's effectively a two-party country. In the last election the third party had less than 1% of the vote. Is that 12.5% threshold a barrier to entry for a third party? Does that demotivate or motivate participation, or how do you see that?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** That's a whole question, and some of the smaller parties really talk about that, given that they do not have 12.5% today, but then we really have a lot of small parties. We think that 90 minutes is about the most we want to go for a debate, so we do not want to have, as we have seen in some other countries, 10 or 12 people debating at the same time. We have chosen to keep it at that level so that we ensure the people who are debating are really from parties that have the potential to lead the next government.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** Thank you.

I'm going to give my time to Ms. Tassi, who has some more questions for you.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.):** Thank you for your testimony and for being here with us today through video conference.

On the ethical code of conduct that you've prepared and had parties sign, how difficult was it to get them to commit to that?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** It's very strange but it was not very difficult. This group was formed first by the archbishop. He looked around and didn't like what he saw around election time, and he called a wide group of people together, a lot of religious bodies, a lot of civic organizations. The chamber was involved because we represented business. We sat for a few months and formulated a code, which covers a wide variety of things because it's about ethical behaviour during the election period.

One thing that I would put forward there was that debates would be a very important aspect to have in this code, so we did have success in getting debates included in the code but, as I explained before, not cited by the debates commission, because initially the group felt they did not want to choose one party, given that I was there at the committee, and we didn't want to appear as though we were being biased in any way. Subsequently I think they realized they had to name a party.

As I said, it was not difficult. Once we called the parties together and we explained what we were doing, they willingly signed on, so we have a code with the signatures of all the major parties. We have about 10 or 11 parties that have signed onto that code.

• (1120)

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** What is the motivation of the parties to sign onto that code? Is it that they know the public wants them to commit?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** I would say it was all PR, so they could say, "we have signed on and we want a debate". In every single election we've had so far, all the leaders have said they want to debate, they will debate. They see the merit in debating, but the incumbent party always then finds an excuse or reason why they should not debate.

In the last election the then prime minister had said publicly in so many places, including in her campaign, that she wanted to debate, that she would debate with the debates commission. Then when we finally had the meeting with her, we got a very long list of conditions under which she would debate, and they violated some of ours.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** Is there a penalty? In the code is there a penalty if they do not participate, if they breach that?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** The only penalty is the public outcry. The code committee will issue a report, and out of that report we would see they did not comply with that particular clause.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** What's been the response of the public with respect to this initiative? How do you do outreach with the public in order to get their input?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** The initiative, meaning the code?

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** Yes, and this whole thing of initiating, not so much the code with respect to the moral aspect but with respect to the leaders' debates.

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** All right. I'll allow Angella to take that.

**Ms. Angella Persad (Immediate Past Chair, Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission):** Good morning.

You hit the nail on the head there, because I think the public outcry has not been loud enough to get the leaders to debate. That is where we realized we did not get the media involved early enough, probably, or give them enough of a seat on the commission. The only way to get the leaders to debate is from a public outcry.

As Catherine explained, we started from the other end. We felt, as the chamber, as leaders, as business leaders in the country, that we needed to have democracy, so we needed to have a debates commission. We started from that end. We did not engage and get the engagement of the public adequately, so they did not call for the debate. We have half the country wanting it, and the other half saying, what good is a debate? There was not enough of a public outcry to get the leaders to debate. We have learned the hard way that it is one of lessons and one of the things we have to fix going forward.

Now the Trinidad & Tobago Publishers & Broadcasters Association is actually part of the commission. We realize that we need to engage them in a different way because they are the only mouthpiece to get to the public. That's a big lesson we learned.

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

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** The modus operandi so far has really been the debates commissioners going to the politicians, having meetings with them, and trying to convince them as to why they should debate. That really has been the approach, and that is definitely not the best approach.

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

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

Now we'll go to Mr. Richards for seven minutes.

**Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC):** Thank you for joining us. I'm surprised you didn't want to make the trip here rather than appear by video conference. You could experience our wonderful weather here. We're -12° Celsius. I'm sure you would enjoy it.

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** No. We will send you some sun instead.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay. That would be great.

I have a couple of questions for you. You had mentioned in your opening remarks that, in the process of forming the commission, you hadn't consulted with politicians or with the public. You obviously acknowledged you felt that was probably something you would do differently if you could do it again, particularly with regard to the public.

I was just curious as to whether that was a conscious decision at the time to not do that consultation with politicians and/or with the public, or was that just an oversight at the time?

• (1125)

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** It was really a timing issue because we started the interim committee in 2009, and then when the snap election was called in 2010 we were still at the interim committee stage. We had not at that time formulated fully how we would go forward and what we would do.

Literally in five weeks or so we had to register the commission, do everything, start organizing the debate. I certainly believe that if we had gone about it in a normal way, we would have gotten other people involved. Again, as I said, it was the chamber's initiative. In one of the chambers we have operating, it's always to get views from other stakeholders and get their input. The timing really hurt us there. It did impact us going forward.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** In terms of lessons for us, advice for us, when this committee makes a decision about what it's going to recommend as to what this would look like going forward, would you suggest that, rather than just moving immediately to try to legislate or put that decision in place, it should be put before the people? In other words, should they be asked their opinion about that particular decision and consulted on it at that point in time? Would those be your thoughts as to good advice for us?

**Ms. Angella Persad:** I think that would definitely be something that should be done, to poll the views of different segments of the public. Obviously at the end of the day a decision needs to be made because you will get some people thinking debates are very important and others thinking they are not. I think getting the views of the public, what they want to hear in a debate and why they think a debate is important, will be a very useful exercise.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** You had mentioned the independence of the commission and how it's very important that it not only be independent but that it be perceived to be independent, that it appear to have independence. Often in Canada these types of appointments are made by the prime minister, who's obviously the representative of one political party. That might therefore give the appearance that it's not necessarily independent from one political party because of the fact that the commissioner would be appointed by that prime minister.

I'm curious about your thoughts on whether we need to be looking at that and finding a way to ensure that either all parties have a say in who that commissioner is or this committee maybe or some body other than just the prime minister is making that appointment. Would your thoughts be that, to give us the proper appearance of independence, that would be important?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** In Trinidad and Tobago, our debates commission does not have the involvement of the government at all, because we have been set up independent of the government. Certainly the Jamaica experience would have been the same thing.

We find in Trinidad that where we have commissions—we have lots of different commissions, like the police service commission—they are always viewed as being political because, as you said, the prime minister makes a recommendation to the president and then the president sets up the commission or commissioner. Therefore our suggestion would be really and truly that the appointment not be part of the government but the committee having come up with what is the best.... I know I said you ought to engage the public also so that the set-up is truly independent, not being named by the prime minister or recommended by the prime minister. I'm not too familiar with your context as to whether there are any other independent bodies that could help in setting up such a commission.

I would also say that in the Commonwealth the word “commission” connotes something, the deals of government. There is also something that has been put to us. Would we like to consider

changing our name to “Trinidad and Tobago Debates something else”, not commission, because once they hear “commission” people think it is a government set-up?

• (1130)

**Ms. Angella Persad:** To add to that, in forming our commission we looked at different representative interests. For instance we looked at legal, communication, civic society, business, and citizen representation for Tobago. We looked at the different representative interests to make sure that we had independent people representing each one of those interests.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay. Obviously you're strongly of the opinion that it needs to be independent and not be appointed by the government directly.

So that I completely understand, you said that the chamber at least began discussions about this, but you mentioned that you made the decision not to have it fund the commission. Who does fund the commission?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** Corporate T & T funds it totally. From the very first debate in 2010, even the debate that did not come off, corporate T & T funded us. The chamber would have been involved with in-kind funding—human resources and those sorts of things, facilities—but the actual cost of the debates is funded totally by corporate T & T, and it has been for all our debates so far.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay, great. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** Going forward, that is also a difficulty. We need to have funding that we can rely on, so not every debate you have to go to corporate T & T and literally put your hands out and beg. We are in the process of looking for international funding from some of these other institutions that support democracy and so on. Perhaps if anyone around the committee is aware of institutions that we can approach, I'd be happy to hear about it through Andrew.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Always looking for ways, eh? Thank you.

Maybe if you send some of your sunshine our way, who knows what could happen.

**Ms. Angella Persad:** I just wanted to add one point on the funding. There is no branding for corporate T & T when they fund the debate, so they get no acknowledgement, no branding at all. This was their return to building democracy in the country.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay, great. Thank you all very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you all very much.

Now we'll move on to Mr. Christopherson.

**Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP):** Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you very much for taking the time. We really appreciate this.

I'll just do a little bit of shifting gears. One of the issues that a lot of presenters have taken time to focus on is the role of social media in these debates and how different the world is in terms of communicating with the public.

How did you approach the issue of social media when you were considering your outreach capacity?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** We did include social media, but we did not include it sufficiently, recognizing that it is in fact a very important media, particularly if you want to get to youth.

We have a website. Right now it's under reconstruction, because we are doing the strategic plan, and there are quite a few changes that we are going to have. We have a Facebook page. We did visit, for instance, the secondary schools, and we had a competition going for involvement, having people put their post and write their comments, etc. on Facebook, and through that get some feedback. We had a competition. Whoever had the most questions put forward would win a prize. That helped us a bit because we got quite a few comments coming in through there, and I think we got a certain amount of youth involvement, too, but certainly not enough.

Going forward in our new strategic plan, we have recognized that we cannot only rely on the mainstream media that we are familiar with, but we have to get this new media involved. We are even thinking, as of yesterday—we had a meeting—that it would be good to bring on a commissioner who was very much inclined to understand the use of social media, how it can help us, how we measure what value we get out of it, and what sorts of programs we can set up.

Definitely anybody going forward must consider social media.

I say Facebook, but of course, you're not only talking Facebook, you're talking about all the other new social media programs outside.

**Mr. David Christopherson:** That's certainly what we're finding.

You also mentioned that, going forward, you want to not only be involved during the election in terms of the debate, but you also want some involvement post-election, and you also mentioned pre-election. I'm interested in what kinds of thoughts you have about the commission and its role in any pre-election activities.

• (1135)

**Ms. Angella Persad:** What we are thinking is that, through the moderators and researchers, through the university and our alignment with the university, we can actually.... The right issues will be researched. So you could influence politics, you could influence democracy by having the right issues being discussed at the debate.

The pre-election involvement would really be to identify the right issues to be discussed and to have debates on those issues even before the actual general election. For instance, right now we don't have a fixed term.

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** That's one of the things we think that we could easily have debated prior to the elections, whether we should have a fixed term for governance and things like that, campaign financing. All things that are relevant to what the party would bring, but bring it all from before. It's a way for us of getting the debates commission accepted as a household name, knowing that we can do debates, and we will have a debate.

**Mr. David Christopherson:** Thank you for your comprehensive answers.

There's another area. This may be as much a political/cultural difference. I found it interesting when you talked about ensuring the independence of the commission, and therefore, under the old adage

of he who pays the piper calls the tune, you go out of your way to ensure there's no government money. You are looking to the corporate side to ensure that independence.

I have to tell you that many of us here in Canada would see it the other way around. We look at public funding as the neutral dollars, and at the private sector—whether they're NGOs on the progressive left or, on the right, corporations making billions of dollars—as having a political agenda, so we go out of our way to make sure they don't have any money.... Public funding is the way we look at it to ensure there is fairness.

Obviously the government of the day holds the purse strings; for instance, our Elections Canada is funded by the public purse. No one believes that just because it's the government that sets the budget they get to decide how that commission runs. That is dictated by other legislation and other regulations.

Just as a matter of curiosity, could you tease out for me how your view is so completely different from ours and why there's this fear, almost—those are my words—at having public money in any way because that begins the tainting process?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** Yes, I think you've probably hit the nail on the head: it's a little different with the culture and the Trinidadian people. Again, because the debates commission is not legislated in any way, you will have a particular politician say, "Yes, I support your debates commission and I'm willing to fund the debates commission." Unless we get something legislated, where from government to government it doesn't matter who is ruling at that time, and it specifies some parameters around the funding so that we would know it would always be there—and again, that it's not partisan—then it becomes very difficult.

In a previous debate, the party in power actually said that they were willing to fund, but they would have said they were willing to fund out of a budget that was probably already allocated to something else. We felt that would certainly lead to bias.

On corporate entities, there is a discussion going on right now about that: how independent are you if corporate entities are funding? You are right, one corporation is aligned to one party and another one to another party. To get around that, because you kind of know which corporations are loyal to which parties, we ensured the widest possible participation by the corporates, so that on both sides of these two major political parties, contributions were made by corporates. It's just getting that breadth that allows us to feel independent, but again, because that is not the best way, it's the other reason why we continue to say that we have to find funding elsewhere. We are looking at international funding.

In the longer term—because it takes a long while to get legislation in Trinidad—there is the hope that eventually we could get the entire master legislation that says they have to debate and they have to provide the funding. In our legislation, we don't even have any substantial funding for political parties' campaigns. It is so small that you probably couldn't even buy a jersey, so really and truly, they also rely on corporations for their funding, which comes right back to the question again: obviously, certain corporations are loyal to certain parties.



•(1140)

**Mr. David Christopherson:** Very good. Thank you so much for your time and your answers.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC)):** Ms. Tassi, please.

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

If you wouldn't mind, please signal me at around a minute, because I'll be sharing my time with Ms. Sahota.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Scott Reid):** I'll signal you at three and a half minutes, all right? Duly noted.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** With respect to the debates, I was taking notes as you were speaking. There were three debates in 2010 and two debates in 2013. Is that accurate?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** No: one in 2010 and two in 2013.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** Were there any others in addition to those from that time?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** No.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** At the beginning when I asked about the public opinion, with respect to the uptake, you said that maybe 50% were in and 50% not so much. Since you've had those debates, has the uptake improved?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** Perhaps not, because something happened in the last debate that we planned in 2015, which did not go well for the commission. We have learned a lot of lessons along the way. Literally, as we go along, we are learning and improving. One of the things that is very important with the debates commission and liaising with the parties is that you must have the identical letter going to all the parties about any matter relative to the debate. We erred in one area where the letters that went to the parties cited a different date about something. The incumbent party did not want a debate, even though they said they would debate, took that and literally stripped us. It impacted our brand so badly, and the political analysts did not come on our side because the particular ones were party-aligned.

We have to do a lot of rebuilding of our brand and our reputation and that's why we need to have a couple of debates before the next general election.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** We've heard testimony on the importance of the role of media in organizing these debates. You mentioned previously that you could have done the reverse and gotten the media on side to convince people. Right now, what do you see as the role of the media?

**Ms. Angella Persad:** We see that role as critical. We see them helping us with the entire production of the debate; but more than that, we see them from now until the general election in 2020. We see them as building awareness of debates, of the issues, and of the need to have your leaders out there debating the issues so that the undecided electorate have something to refer to, to make up their minds. We see that as the media's responsibility, and we see that even more now because we can't go to the politicians, the leaders, to ask them to debate and be confident that they will. If the public calls for it, they have to debate because then they pay the ultimate price.

**Ms. Filomena Tassi:** With respect to the structure of the commission, does the media have any say or input into decision-making?

**Ms. Angella Persad:** They do because two members of the media association are on the commission itself.

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** We are developing a detailed MOU, which would spell out the rights and responsibilities of both parties, the debates commission and the media, so we know going forward there's a really strict way, a modus operandi, between the two.

•(1145)

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

I'm going to pass my remaining time to my colleague, Ms. Sahota.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.):** Good morning.

Do you scale down as a debates commission after election years? We heard from the U.S., and they said they were most active during campaigns but then they would scale down to only a few people, therefore reducing costs. I don't know how your commission operates.

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** We operate very much like that. During an election period we bring on extra staff and we would have a full office of all the different skills required and then after elections, we would go back to doing almost nothing. Again, one of the shortfalls for us is that we still relied on the chamber staff during that period so after the elections we went back to our normal work. We recognize that's not the best way to go forward.

I am very familiar that this is the way the U.S. debates operate. That's also the way the Jamaican debates operate. With our new mandate of wanting to be involved in all processes and all stages of the governance cycle, we are in the process right now of looking for a permanent CEO and also a permanent admin assistant and in the activities we have drilled down from the strategic plan. A lot of things need to be done during this interim period so by the time the elections come around, a lot of work has been done.

As I said, I know that's the way some of the others are done, but I really think it's a good exercise to keep the momentum going even outside the election period.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** During the interim, it's just a couple of positions. How many bodies would you have during an election year, how many different positions? You said relevant skills are needed. What would they be?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** During the election period, the production people are always outsourced. That would be a group made up of probably 10 persons or so. We always bring in our marketing and communication people—again outsourced. That could be probably just two persons. Then we have the office staff who will be there. We normally have about four or five persons working with us, doing all of the front communication—writing of letters, making the calls, and organizing with the different venues where we're going to have the debates. Pretty much that's it.

On the night of the debate, we call on other people. We have to have security on call, and they're on the site. For the week of the debate itself, we beef up even more with additional resources.

The difficulty in having a full office throughout the period when you're not having debates is the cost of carrying that office.

**Ms. Angella Persad:** Just to add, the commissioners all understand that they have to pitch in and do work as well. During the election, nearing the election, the commissioners also have rules and responsibilities.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Scott Reid):** Thank you.

I'll have time for a Conservative round, five minutes; and a Liberal round, five minutes.

Let's go to Mr. Nater, please.

**Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC):** Thank you, again, to our friends from Trinidad and Tobago for their excellent commentary today. I like the opportunity to speak to our Commonwealth cousins and the opportunity to speak on similar electoral systems and structures of government, and as Mr. Christopherson pointed out, from slightly different cultures as well. It's good to have the dynamics of that conversation.

I have a quick question of clarification. In terms of the actual elections themselves, how are they administered in Trinidad and Tobago? Is there a government entity that administers the elections?

**Ms. Angella Persad:** There's the Elections and Boundaries Commission, which is a government entity. They administer all the elections. They would ensure that there are polling booths all through the country. They would ensure free and fair election voting right throughout the country. The responsibility lies with them. They do a pretty good job every year, every election time.

**Mr. John Nater:** I would assume it would be structured as an independent type. It's not a government-appointed body, or it's not affiliated, I should say, with a political organization, then.

**Ms. Angella Persad:** I think it's appointed by the president of the country but in consultation with the prime minister.

**Mr. John Nater:** I'd like to touch a little on some of the dynamics of elections in Trinidad and Tobago. In Canada we have a very strong leader-centred system, where local candidates are very much, for better or worse, tied to the national leader. The success of candidates in local ridings is tied to the national party and the national leader. Is that a similar dynamic in Trinidad and Tobago, where an individual representative in a district is very much tied to the success of the national campaign and the national leader?

• (1150)

**Ms. Angella Persad:** Yes, it's very much so. The national leaders really are the ones who are the dominant leaders. We have typically mainly two entities here that are the leading parties in Trinidad and Tobago. Just as a bit of background, we have two major ethnic groups in Trinidad and Tobago. We have the Indians and we have the Africans. The two dominant parties are made up of both of these. Then we have maybe one or two other parties that are made up of people who are undecided, who are not blindly loyal, I would say, to one or the other. That is how the makeup goes.

When this commission started in 2010, one thing that made the chamber decide it must take a responsibility was because of the campaigning that was going on, the dirty politics and the ridiculous, for want of a better word, campaigns that were going on. There was no debate. There was no question of issues, discussing issues, giving

people an opportunity to understand how leaders were going to treat and deal with these issues. There was nothing like that at all. There was just a lot of campaign rhetoric. It was speaking of the parties and speaking of individuals as well. The chamber, at that point, decided, "We have to take a responsibility here to improve on this and give our country a chance to really improve the democracy and vote not on tribal lines but on issues." That's the background, I would say.

**Mr. John Nater:** Excellent.

Prior to the establishment of the debates commission, were there any debates at the local level in individual districts? I know here in Canada we often have chambers of commerce debates, agricultural society debates. Was there anything like that at the local level in terms of individual districts at all?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** No, we didn't have anything like that. What you would find is that the chamber of commerce would invite the prospective leaders to come and address their members, and the members would ask them questions. In the context of a debate, no, we have not had that. We've had interviews on television, but not a debate.

Also, the candidates are strongly tied to the leader, even though they go through an interview process before deciding who would be the candidate. The PM has a veto there. Well, the leader has a veto there, and he or she can decide which candidate will go up. It's very strongly tied.

**Mr. John Nater:** I think that would be, for better or for worse, similar to our system in terms of the centrality of our leader.

You mentioned earlier that the chamber provides a bit of in-kind service to the debate commission. Is that a structure that you would recommend to Canada, having an existing entity provide the administrative support, or would you recommend a completely independent structure?

The example that has been raised is that our Elections Canada could perhaps provide the administrative function, but have a separate commission. Is that something you would recommend?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** I think as far as possible, you should remain independent from any organization, because as I said, even though the chamber was extremely supportive, there were times when that worked against us, because people said the chamber is big business and big business is supporting this, so you're not really for the people.

So as far as possible, and especially if you get it legislated and you get funding for it, I think you should try your best to have your own supports so that you're really independent.

**Mr. John Nater:** Thank you very much.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Scott Reid):** Ms. Sahota, please.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** My follow-up question is about how you disseminate the debates, how you get them out to people. We had a consortium of networks here in the past that used to organize some of the main debates. There's a lot of competition over who gets to carry the debate, what network is going to be the official provider, who's going to craft the questions, which journalists are going to get involved.

How do you deal with that? You said you had in-house production. Do you produce the whole thing and then give it out to all the networks?

• (1155)

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** This is one area that we still have to look at, in terms of what is the best way for us to go forward.

So far we have contracted an outside production team to produce the debate. Then we go to the media house, the television stations—because it's a televised event—and ask them to bid on what it will cost to actually carry the debate. One of the conditions is always that they will allow all the other media. In other words, they would have a feed to all the other media houses.

That's the way we've operated in the past. For two of our debates, the government, which owns a television station, carried it for us at no cost, so we did not have to pay. We do not have the strong competition that you have or what you see in the U.S., where the different media houses are bidding for it.

The arrangement we're trying to have, going forward with the broadcasters' association, is that they would come together, this consortium kind of thing, and they would decide which one would carry it. They would have the feed go out to all and they'd take up the entire production cost, because the production costs during the debate itself are easily about 70% of our total cost.

If we can get the media houses to take up that production cost, produce the debate and carry it, it would certainly save us a lot in terms of financial resources.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** For us, accessibility is really important, making sure that all types of people with different income ranges have access to this debate, including hearing-impaired people, vision-impaired people. We're thinking about that quite a bit. The problem we run into is in making sure that some of the big networks carry it, because it's the ones that are on basic cable that more people have access to. However, they may not be satisfied with the production quality if we do it with a different production company and don't use their medium to produce; they all feel they carry a certain quality.

That's an issue, but we've been looking at Internet streaming over different types of social media. Have you considered any of that? Is your population connected more via Internet or do you find that more of the population has access to cable?

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** More of the population has access to cable. The Internet as a means of viewing television is really something quite new in Trinidad and Tobago. Most people would be viewing our main cable stations. We don't have the vast number of stations that you have. We probably have only four large television stations, and all four will carry it.

We allow our radio stations to carry it too because, depending on what part of the country you're from, you will find it is only radio that you can tune in to.

What we have lacked in the past is coverage through social media. That's one of the things we're looking at for the 2020 elections, so that other people can.... During a debate people send in comments through social media, and we hear what their interests are and what

they think about the debate. So far, that has been the limit of what we have used social media for during a debate.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** That's very interesting.

One of the other things we're looking at is whether people using social media can ask live questions to the debaters. How can we reach the greatest number of people?

**The Chair:** We all really appreciate your attendance here today. It has been very helpful for us to see another Commonwealth situation that is ahead of us in having a debates commission.

Thank you and good luck. We look forward to your sunshine being sent north.

**Ms. Catherine Kumar:** Thank you very much. We wish you all the best in forming a debates commission that is best suited to your country.

**Ms. Angella Persad:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** We're going to suspend for two minutes while we make a technological change for the other witnesses.

• (1155)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1200)

**The Chair:** Good afternoon, welcome back to the 86th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Our witnesses on this panel, by video conference from Jamaica, are Noel daCosta, chairman, and Trevor Fearon, resource consultant. Thank you both for making yourselves available today. I'm sure you're very busy, but this is going to be very helpful for us.

Mr. daCosta, if you would like to make some opening remarks, we'll then have the committee members ask each of you questions.

**Mr. Noel daCosta (Chairman, Jamaica Debates Commission):** Thank you very much.

The Jamaica Debates Commission was formed in 2002. Our main purpose was to promote pre-election debate between the political parties so as to promote civil discourse, to defuse political tension, and to inform the public of the protagonists so that they could make informed decisions. The debates commission is a partnership between the Jamaica Chamber of Commerce—and Mr. Trevor Fearon here is the CEO of the Jamaica Chamber of Commerce—and the Media Association Jamaica, which is a body composed of media house owners.

We established a “partnership at will” and we have now converted that into a registered legal entity. We are going to be applying for charitable status shortly. The Jamaica Debates Commission is run by six directors who are nominated, three from the chamber of commerce and three from the Media Association Jamaica.

How do we work? We operate under a strict code of conduct. We have developed ground rules and guidelines for debates conduct. We call on our media partners to provide the resources to stage the debates.

What have we done to date? We have organized political debates ahead of general elections in 2002, 2007, and 2011 and staged political debates ahead of local government elections in 2012 and 2016.

Typically, our debates are organized. We have three debates: one on social issues, one on economic issues, and one where the leadership of both parties debate each other. We also have team debates on local government elections.

Our debates are staged live events in studio settings with invited guests. We use moderators, who act as traffic cops, and a panel of journalists who pose questions to the protagonists. All telecasts are free to air, on TV and radio, and since 2007 we have been streaming via the Internet. Those who use our signals are obliged to broadcast exactly as received. We do that because we're supported and funded by sponsors from the private sector. In breaks in the debate we insert their advertisements, their promotional material, so we want those who rebroadcast the signal to use it exactly in that form.

During a debate, we set up a debate watch in various communities where we encourage the people in the community to look at the debate, to record their impression, and to discuss it after the debate has been completed. We also have done polls after the debates to see how effective they are, with some interesting results to date. We also have post-debate debriefings and we report back to our sponsors as to how we have spent the money that they entrusted with us to provide these debates.

Those are my key points.

• (1205)

**Mr. Trevor Fearon (Resource Consultant, Jamaica Debates Commission):** I think that's pretty comprehensive.

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

That's great. It's another different model.

The way the questions work, each member from each party gets seven minutes total. It includes their questions to you and your answers to them.

We'll start out with Mr. Graham.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** Thank you for the presentation.

I note that Jamaica seems to have a fairly two-party system. I saw that in the last election it was 50.01% to 49.99% or something like that. It was a very tight election.

What are the thresholds for participation in the debate, and how do you handle third parties, the other parties that don't have significant support right now?

• (1210)

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** We have criteria to be accepted, because we've had requests in the past from third and fourth parties to be included in the debates. We have some criteria they must satisfy.

The first is that they should have a written constitution, which requires the holding of periodic elections for the selection of officers. In addition, they must be recognized by the chief electoral officer as an entity that is found appropriate to participate in the debates and to contest political elections.

The second is that they should, in the last general elections, have had an aggregate of not less than 10% of the valid votes cast.

The third condition is that in a national public opinion poll recognized by the commission as having been scientifically conducted, they should have obtained not less than 15% support as a party for whom electors intend to vote.

They must satisfy condition one, which is the first one, as well as either of the other two conditions.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** The board of the commission is three members from the chamber of commerce and three from the media association. How do you assess the independence of the organization in terms of the ability for it to make decisions completely independent from the business community or from media's own interests?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** We have a strict code of conduct that all the commissioners must follow. They sign a document saying that they have satisfied all the conditions.

We have learned that the integrity of the commissioners is critical to people putting trust in the work that we do. For example, our code of conduct proscribes making personal contributions or funding to any of the parties or candidates, attending the fundraising events of any of the candidates, participating in their campaign in any form, writing or authoring any documents that the protagonists might wish to put out, being a candidate in any of the elections, disclosing their own voting intentions, and several other criteria that we have developed to ensure that their political credentials are above reproach.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** Is it possible for us to get a copy of that declaration?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** We can arrange that.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** Excellent. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Mr. Simms.

**Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.):** Good day, gentlemen. Thanks for joining us.

Very quickly, you said that it's privately supported. You seek out advertisers and they buy the ads or they get exclusive rights to put on their ads during the breaks of the debate. Is that correct? The broadcast of this debate is fully funded by the private sector.

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Yes. We approach large corporations and we appeal to their public spirit, their national spirit, their civic pride, and their desire for free and fair elections. We also allow them to advertise during the breaks.

We sell packages. We have three packages—gold, silver, and bronze—which determine the extent of the advertising exposure at the beginning, at the break, and at the end of the debate.

**Mr. Scott Simms:** There is no government money being put forward to help support this endeavour in any of the debates.

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** None whatsoever.

**Mr. Scott Simms:** What about compulsory participation? I don't know if this has ever happened. You have a two-party system. I'm assuming everybody plays along, but do you have a rule in place if one of the major parties does not want to take part?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Yes. In our last general election one of the two major parties decided not to debate.

**Mr. Scott Simms:** And what did you do?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Well, our partners, you recall, are the media association, so we brought the full force of the media to let the whole country know that they are big clients of the debate and we negotiated with them up to, I think, the day before the debates were scheduled. At every step of the way, we kept the public informed as to how the discussions and the negotiations were going, and the reasons that were being put forward not to debate. In the end, they decided not to debate, so we had to cancel the debate.

An anecdote related to that is that, subsequently, the party that refused to debate lost the election. They did a poll, and one of the main findings of the poll was that their decision not to debate weighed heavily against them in the election. They have admitted that they have sort of learned their lesson, so they will participate in the future.

•(1215)

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** We should say, though, if I could just interject, we had been in negotiations with both parties before, for weeks and months, and there was an agreement in principle that the debates would take place. The backing out came pretty much as a surprise to the organizers and to the Jamaican public.

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** They expressed their disapproval in the actual voting.

**The Chair:** Okay, thank you very much.

Mr. Nater.

**Mr. John Nater:** Again, thank you to our participants today. It's always nice to hear different viewpoints and different examples of debate commissions around the world, so it's great to have both of you joining us today by video conference.

In your opening comments, you mentioned that there are typically three debates: one on social issues, one on economic issues, and one a leadership debate. Am I right to understand that it's only the third debate, the leadership debate, where the party leaders participate? Who participates in the first two debates? Is it the minister responsible for social issues or economic issues, or is it simply a representative that the parties choose to participate in those debates?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** It's the representative that the parties choose, but typically it is the minister responsible for the area on one side and the shadow minister on the other side.

**Mr. John Nater:** In the past typically has it only been a two-person debate, then, for those social and economic issues as well, or have there been examples where there has been a third?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** No, in one of the social issues debates we agreed with the parties that they would put up three debaters, so we had three on each side, including those responsible for the particular area. This was a social issues debate. We had three on each side. For the finance debate, we would typically have the finance minister and the shadow finance minister.

**Mr. John Nater:** Very good.

Now, in terms of public reaction or public interest, am I right to assume that typically the third debate, the leadership debate, is the

most widely viewed? I'd be interested in how much public attention the first two debates, on the social issues and the economic issues, get compared to the leadership debate.

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Those two debates are quite well supported and quite well viewed, not as much as the leadership debates, but the Jamaican society is very politically aware. Both debates engender a fair level of interest, but the leadership debate is the one that usually attracts the highest viewership, and the other two usually get more than average attention from the public.

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** As you will have seen in our documentation, since 2007 we have done polls after the election itself, and from those polls we see the degree of viewership. It's still a substantial viewership. The persons who are watching will attest to whether or not watching this particular debate or that particular debate contributed to their voting decisions later. A leadership debate will probably be the most important, but the others also factor into the voting decision.

**Mr. John Nater:** Very good. In terms of the commission's role in choosing the moderators of the debate, what role does the commission play after the moderators have been chosen? Does the moderator then take complete control over the debate in terms of the types of questions asked, or does the commission still have a role to play once the moderator has been chosen?

•(1220)

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** The moderator is primarily a traffic policeman. Persons at the debate are panels of journalists. The commission selects the journalists, but they also have to be agreed to by both parties that are debating. We have three journalists who ask the questions during the debate. The commission does not know what these questions are going to be. We sequester the journalists, so that amongst themselves we don't have two journalists asking the same question. Neither the commission nor anybody else has any idea what these questions are going to be.

**Mr. John Nater:** You said the journalists have to be agreed to by the political parties. Is it common for one or both of the political parties to veto one of the choices for journalists, or veto multiple choices, or is it generally accepted that the journalists who are proposed are typically accepted by the political parties?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** We have had instances. Generally they are accepted because we have learned how to choose the less politically biased journalists. In the past we have had journalists who have been questioned by the political parties, but I don't think we have ever removed any.

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** No. In the end we haven't, but as you had said there is a certain degree of... We will know, or a political party will advise us, whether a certain journalist has been writing speeches for the opposing party, or has been doing *a*, *b*, or *c*, and therefore they don't think it is a good idea for that person to be selected. When cases like that arise we can certainly adjust our list.

We work with a list. The journalists are invited. They have to agree to sit on the panel in the first place. Sometimes it's a process of attrition, but we end up with a panel that both parties are either comfortable with or not opposed to.

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** I should just add that all the work of the journalists, the commission, and the resource persons is voluntary: nobody gets paid.

**Mr. John Nater:** Very good. Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Now I'm looking forward to Mr. Christopherson's questions, maybe on the ads. Mr. Christopherson.

**Mr. David Christopherson:** Thank you very much for your presentation. I have a close affinity with Jamaica. A few years ago I was there under the auspices of GOPAC, the Global Organization of Politicians Against Corruption, the Canadian chapter, and we were doing some work with your public accounts department and your auditor general. Far more importantly, I just came back a couple of weeks ago from being on your beaches and I wish I was still there.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. David Christopherson:** Thank you so very much for taking the time. This has been very helpful. I have a couple of areas I would like to explore.

I was very intrigued by the fact that the party that chose to pull out of the debates lost the election. We had the same situation, except we have no evidence yet that I've seen that the refusal to participate in the national debates had any role in it. I found it fascinating that you were able to discern through polling, I think you said, that indeed it was a major factor.

One of the issues we're looking at is if there is a refusal to participate, what, if any, are the repercussions. Is there any disciplinary action? I, for one, have been very reluctant to go down that road of imposing some kind of a sanction on a party refusing to participate in a debate. It's the whole idea of trying to legislate what happens in the dynamics of an election. However, I'm open to it if that's the only tool to ensure that we don't have a repeat of the disgrace that we saw last time, where we did not have the kind of national leaders' debate that Canadians expect.

Sorry for the long preamble, but all of that is to ask you: what do you think that was about, the public outcry and the role of the media? Were there editorials, protests, online protests? Can you give me an idea of the manifestation of the anger or the upset that took place that led to it being a factor in people's decision-making?

• (1225)

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** It was all available. Editorials spoke to it. Social media went berserk when they found out there would be no debates. There were letters to the editor. The business community was quite upset. Business organizations wrote to the newspaper decrying the fact there was not going to be a debate so that people could see the platform of both parties in an unbiased and non-hyped environment. There was a public outcry.

**Mr. David Christopherson:** That's beautiful.

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** The poll that was done afterwards was done by the party that lost—we didn't do the poll; we did our own private poll. Their finding, which they also published, was that their decision not to debate was fatal. Those are their words.

**Mr. David Christopherson:** That's great. That's where we want to get. That's where we want to be. We want to make it such that whatever the regime necessary, no one would dare say no again to a national debate. Certainly that's what's motivating me. I just love that you had that outcry because that's the best kind of regime to have: where you don't have the rules, it's the public that says that this is unacceptable, that if you go down this road, you're going to pay a price. I'm just thrilled to hear that.

What do you see right now as your major challenge? We're always looking for improvements, ways to do things better. What's on your horizon to continue to push to be as effective as you can?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** I think our challenge right now is to get secure funding for our work. As I mentioned, we're all volunteers. There has been talk within the private sector of some institutionalizing of the work that we do. To that end, we have registered ourselves as a legal entity. Before that we were just a partnership of a media association and chamber of commerce.

That would be what we are putting forward, looking at a secure source of funding rather than the whims of someone, and to ensure some structured continuity for what we do.

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** I would add one point there. Up to the 2016 general election, we were pretty much thinking that the debates were institutionalized, that because of the previous election cycles we would probably get some push-back and some rough treatment at the hands of a political party. It was sufficiently institutionalized that no party would decide not to. It was a rude awakening to us. We realized that the process of institutionalization of the debates process is a constant work in progress. The fact that we were able to get so much support from all parts of society—calling upon the parties to debate, insisting that it take place—was because we managed to build coalitions with our great variety of entities in civil society, etc.

That process is one that has to go on and it's something that we are devoted to carrying on.

• (1230)

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Perhaps I could add one point. I suppose you will have a similar issue. We don't have fixed election dates, so the parties can call an election tomorrow. We have to be in a constant state of readiness to put on a debate within a short period of time. That has some challenges, particularly when you have to go out and source funding before putting on the debate.

**Mr. David Christopherson:** Thank you so very much for your answers. I appreciate it.

**The Chair:** We'll go on to Mr. Bittle.

**Mr. Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.):** Thank you so much for coming and helping us out on this project.

One issue we heard about from traditional media outlets in Canada is that they looked to the timing of the debate and they wanted to put it on at a time when it wasn't up against a popular sporting event or a popular television show because they wanted to get as many eyeballs on the debates as possible. Can you tell us how you determine the timing of a debate in Jamaica?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** We also have that issue. Fortunately for us, our partners in this are the media association. They're quite willing to cut us a lot of slack. Our debates typically start at nine o'clock, which is after all the major news shows have taken place. Even though they are partners, we have to pay them for airtime. We like to think we get some concessions on those rates. They have been publicly displaying things like a willingness to accommodate us in the timing of the debates. We have been having it at nine o'clock since we started. We have had no issues other than the background noises that we're missing this program or that program. We've been able to do it through the good relationship we have with our partners.

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** The fact is that we have a short window. Usually we know it has to take place within a period of, say, a week and a half—all three debates. It's a matter of negotiating with the parties. If one party is having its major and final mass gathering, we know it's not going to be that night. Similarly for the other party. We generally try to include a weekend, usually a Saturday, for the final debate, or a Friday. These are all high viewership nights, and we also try to slot the other two in the week before. That has worked out with the parties. The agreement is that both are going to claim they are suffering because of particular issues, but since both are suffering, they're willing to live with it.

**Mr. Chris Bittle:** Just in terms of comparing the two election cycles—because we do have fixed elections in Canada, but minority governments can happen, and then in that time an election can happen at any moment—how long are your elections typically?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Between nomination day and election day, there are 21 days. We don't have the debates before nomination day because we're not sure who the parties are going to put up for election, theoretically. Between nomination day and election day, within that 21-day period, we have to plan and execute those three debates, culminating with the leadership debate.

• (1235)

**Mr. Chris Bittle:** What work does the organization do to take into account persons with disabilities who may not have the ability to access a broadcast in the same way that you or I may be able to do?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** We have signers for the hearing impaired. I think that's the only concession we make.

**Mr. Chris Bittle:** Excellent.

In terms of the dissemination of the broadcast—and I think you touched on it—you have to pay for the airtime.

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Yes.

**Mr. Chris Bittle:** What about the online feed? Is that available for anyone to use and broadcast in any way? How does that work?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** The online features are available, but they have to broadcast it as it appears. They can't edit it. They can't insert advertisements or anything into the period of the debate.

**Mr. Chris Bittle:** One of the issues that we're discussing is whether or not such an organization in Canada should be legislated. I know it's a different set-up. Would you see the benefit of having legislation passed requiring a debates commission? Could you discuss that?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** If you legislate it, then the funding would have to be secure.

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** Some of our colleagues have gone that route of a debate commission or debate-organizing bodies in other countries. We have never really come to a policy position on that. I think what we would find most useful would be movement towards fixed election dates.

I think there is a sense that public pressure, public opinion, can drive the parties to feel compelled to debate.

At this point I'm not sure that there are many advantages to having it put in legislation.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We will now go on to Mr. Richards.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Thank you to both of you for being with us today to help us out with this study. I appreciate your making some of your time available to us.

You mentioned that the commission had been created by the chamber of commerce and the media association jointly. Is that correct?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Yes.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Were they the bodies that then appointed you as chairman and appointed the commission as well? Who appoints that? Is that them, or how are you chosen?

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** The two partners chose the individuals in either entity, the chamber and the Media Association Jamaica. It was those entities that endorsed the participation of, say, Mr. daCosta, and two other commissioners from the chamber because of their whole interest in this area.

The media association did the same thing; it nominated its own three persons from its side. As Noel said, it's a voluntary thing, so they have to be certain that these persons are going to put in the time. It is a lot of time during that lead-up to an election, and so on, and they chose a coalition of the willing, in terms of volunteers, and those would be the commissioners.

• (1240)

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** These commissioners would have to be persons who have no obvious political leanings and persons whom both parties and the general public would find trustworthy. In choosing the commissioners, both partners keep these criteria in mind.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Is that codified somehow, or is it just informally the process that was put in place?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** It's not really codified anywhere.

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** There are no regulations per se. It's just that the debates commission is a creation of these two entities.

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** As far as the chairman is concerned, the chairman alternates between both partners and is changed after every election cycle.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay, so it's kind of an agreement that everyone has and understands.

Would you then say that has served you well and worked well? As a sort of addition to that, for our benefit, have you found that having it be independent from the government—it's not chosen by the government or the political parties—has been something that's important and valuable?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Yes, I think it has served us well since 2002. I think the fact that there is no government intervention in choosing any of the...or having any say at all in the whole Jamaica Debates Commission has worked to our advantage.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Do you feel that has been an important aspect of it?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Yes.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I was curious about the polling you mentioned, which is done following each debate to determine whether it was effective. What kinds of questions are asked to determine that? Is it to get a sense as to whether it was effective in terms of giving people the ability to make a judgment about...like whether the format itself was effective? What type of polling and what types of questions are asked to determine that?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** The questions would be to those who watched the debates. We would get some demographic description of those who are responding. Pollsters would ask questions as to whether the debates influenced their decisions in voting.

Some of the questions would be, "Did the debate help you to understand the issues any better? Did it bring clarity to some of the burning questions that the society would ask around the time of the debate? As a result of looking at the debate, would you change your voting intentions?"

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** Or, "Did you change your voting intentions?"

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Yes. We did these polls, not after the debates but after the elections.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I guess a metric of success, then, is whether it actually influenced people's decisions on who they voted for. Is that what you're saying? Is that what you're considering as one of the metrics of success, then?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Yes. One of the metrics is whether it influenced your voting decision, either positively or negatively.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Quickly, what other metrics would be part of that determination as to whether it was successful?

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** We would ask them for their thoughts about the formats we used. Was it a format that they thought should be improved? Did it work? What would they have preferred?

Part of it is also qualitative in order to get constant feedback, because of this constant process of improvement that we are engaged in. There are the standard formats versus, for instance, a town hall format. We try to relate that to the age of the respondents and whether people would have liked questions coming in from social media, because that's pretty new for us. Those types of assessments help us understand the impacts and how to improve the next time.

•(1245)

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** As a result of these poll findings, we have changed our format somewhat. For example, in the last set of debates we had a facility where the public could ask questions of the debaters

via social media. They responded in real time while the debate was on.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** That's great. Thank you very much for your input today.

**The Chair:** Before we go to Mr. Simms, who I know is itching to go, I have one question. You had the two people who you were expecting to show up, and at the last minute one of the parties cancelled. Did you give any thought to allowing the person who was willing to show up to have some free airtime and just talk to the public in the meeting?

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** Whether we would have done that and then chair a debate, no.

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** We thought about it and decided against it.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mr. Simms, you're on.

**Mr. Scott Simms:** First of all, thanks for all the information. I think I'm getting the general gist of how you perform, of how you do it.

The shaming aspect of it for someone who doesn't show up is very interesting, and I agree with Mr. Christopherson. I think that's a fantastic way by which you could police this and also make sure that it's effective by letting them know how the public feels about their absence.

What are some of the changes you're planning to make for the next debate, given what you have been through thus far?

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** I think we'll try to find a way to include more questions rather than limiting questions to the selected journalists. We're looking to find a way to include more questions from the general public, but we want to do it in such a way that we could filter out the partisan party supporters who send specific types of questions and also filter it in such a way that it doesn't come across as sterile or boring in the end.

The objective would be to get more participation from the public, because in the final analysis the debates are for them. We want to represent that as best as we can through debate on issues that the public finds interesting.

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** If I could just add to that, we would also want some greater engagement with young people, because what we're finding here is that the size of the voter turnout has been declining. It's particularly noticeable among young voters, newer voters, or people who are newly joining the electorate. One of the things we have been considering is what some of our counterparts do. Should we be having debates in educational institutions, framing and locating them in various educational institutions, or in some way bringing the young people more into the process?

**Mr. Scott Simms:** Do you have the ability to sanction these types of debates in those institutions?

**Mr. Trevor Fearon:** Given the time we have to prepare—it'll be in the middle of a school year, so to find a facility that we can set up—it's tricky.

**Mr. Scott Simms:** ...but it would be sanctioned by you. Okay.

The rest of my time I give to Mr. Fillmore.



**The Chair:** You'll probably be the last intervenor, unless anyone else is anxious to go.

**Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.):** Thank you, both, for your time and sharing your experiences today.

I'll start by saying there are many of us—and I expect it might be true of you as well—who feel that debates play a fundamental role in providing voters with the information they need to make an informed decision come voting time at the ballot box. We want to provide voters with the information they need, and this is why we're so focused on creating a credible and durable debates commission.

I'm wondering whether your debates commission has, as part of its mandate, any kind of public education role beyond just the production and broadcasting dissemination of a debate. Is there anything else you're doing to encourage viewership, for example, or to otherwise engage voters and citizens outside of the actual debate in election period?

• (1250)

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Yes, we do. Well, not outside of the election period, no. We are set up primarily to stage debates. During the debates themselves, we have set up what we call debate watches in various communities, as I mentioned earlier. We encourage the community to look at the debates as a community, not individually in their homes but in a communal setting. We usually have a facilitator there who moderates discussion—because the community is made up of supporters of both parties—around what they saw in the debate. It's not about what happened 20 years in the past, but what they learned from the debate and how it would help them to come to a decision about their voting choices.

**Mr. Andy Fillmore:** That's fascinating. We had some ideas from participants in some round tables that we held, who suggested coffee houses or community events surrounding the debate. These would facilitate discussion and perhaps, in some cases, even join it with a performance of this kind or that kind, making it a community event that draws people together so the conversation is shared.

Thank you for sharing your experience.

**The Chair:** Thank you both for being with us. We really appreciate it. It sheds a whole other dimension on our study. We wish we were down there in the warmth with you, but thanks for giving us your time.

**Mr. Noel daCosta:** Thank you very much. We're glad to be here.

**The Chair:** Committee members, on Thursday we'll be looking at the draft report. You've received it already; I read it last night. Any additions from today will be added. Remember, it's in confidence; we do committee reports in confidence.

Mr. Christopherson.

**Mr. David Christopherson:** Being the new year, I'm just getting caught up on everything. It's my understanding that the parliamentary secretary held—and there was just a reference to it now—some public sessions of some kind on this whole thing. Can I just get a clarification? Is that correct?

**Mr. Andy Fillmore:** Yes, the minister and I held a series of five round tables across the country, from east to west: Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver. Each was about two hours in length, and we invited members of civil society organizations,

academia, traditional and new media, and other interested folks. The idea is to create a third method of gaining information from Canadians, the first being this study, the second being the open portal for all Canadians to share their ideas, and the third being the round tables where perhaps more candid conversations could occur.

**Mr. David Christopherson:** I'm not going to make a mountain out of this, but it still troubles me. The way that the government has viewed this, in my opinion, has been somewhat different from my concept of what it meant to let committees be more independent and respect the work of committees.

This is the first time I've heard that there are three streams of influence on this report. The only one I know about is this committee. I understand the portal may have been there and whatever. I'm not saying it's a bad thing to do. The government has every right to do that, and I'm glad they're talking to Canadians.

What I'm having some trouble with is, we were asked... I mean, the whole thing has been kind of weird. When I sat down with the minister, she was the one who asked if we were interested in doing this. I said yes for the reasons I've already outlined with our guests. It makes me nuts that one of the leaders said no and got away with it. They should be there, and they should have to debate.

Then when the letter came here, it was, "Oh, I'm so glad the committee has decided to undertake this". I'm thinking, all right. I let it go, it's no big deal. Then, at another point, you came forward as a parliamentary secretary with a whole list of recommendations that you had. I can't go into it in detail because it was in camera, but you did have a list of things that you wanted from the minister. Now there's this other stream with the minister. I just have some trouble understanding.

Let me have my rant, and then I'll let it go, Chair.

My understanding was that we were tasked with this issue, especially this committee. It's arguably, along with public accounts, the most non-partisan committee that we have. In fact, it only works when we get past our partisanship. It made all the sense in the world to me that we were tasked with this, we agreed to do it, we set out, and we've been doing it.

Then there are these other activities by the minister, and it's almost as if this committee was sort of just one of the pawns in their overall political strategy of how they're going to get themselves out of the hole that they've dug for themselves on the issue of democratic reform.

I just want to leave it with you that this government consistently, notwithstanding the individuals, in fact, the opposite of the members of the committee that I'm looking at.... The government itself consistently does not, in my mind, live up to its promise about the way it was going to view and utilize committees.

This is just one more example. It's not a big, egregious one. It's not like this is all I'm going to do about it, and there are no cameras here, so nobody's even going to know I did this except you. I just want to say that it's still not consistent with the kind of respect that I expected from this government based on the promises they made about how committees will operate.

I've been doing committees for an awfully long time here, and in the provincial legislature, and my idea of an independent committee

doing work is different from the way the government has handled this file. I've just been kind of disappointed.

It seems to be more cross-purposes or silly decisions rather than a real deliberative effort to thwart our work. It just leaves a bad taste that it didn't go exactly the way it could have, the way of a fully independent committee, and it certainly doesn't match the promise.

However, having said that, it gets it off my chest, Chair, and I'm good. Thanks.

• (1255)

**The Chair:** Thank you for airing those thoughts.

Thursday we'll look at the report. Is that good with everyone?

This meeting is adjourned.

---







Published under the authority of the Speaker of  
the House of Commons

---

### SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

---

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the *Copyright Act*. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a Committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the *Copyright Act*.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its Committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

---

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <http://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité  
du Président de la Chambre des communes

---

### PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

---

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

---

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.noscommunes.ca>