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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 17 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3), the committee is meeting for its study of the Leaders' Debates Commission mandate and its experience during the 2025 federal election.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person and theoretically on Zoom.

Before we continue, I would ask all in-person participants to consult the written cards on the table. There is a short video. Please keep in mind the health and safety of everyone in the room, especially our interpreters.

I'd like to make a few comments for members. I'll remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair. For members in the room, as you know, raise your hand if you'd like to speak. If you're on Zoom or find your way onto Zoom, use the "raise hand" feature and we will do our best.

Before we hear from our witness today—Michel Cormier from the Leaders' Debates Commission—we have a quick consent motion.

Three budgets on studies were presented to the committee. Is it the consent of the committee to adopt those budgets?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: I will now turn to Monsieur Cormier, who's the executive director and acting commissioner of the Leaders' Debates Commission.

You have five minutes, please, for your opening statement.

[Translation]

Michel Cormier (Executive Director and Acting Commissioner, Leaders' Debates Commission): Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

[English]

I wish to thank you for the opportunity to report on the commission's mandate and the 2025 federal leaders' debate.

In many parts of the world, democracy is under increasing pressure, undermined by disinformation and polarization. In such an environment, political debates represent a rare opportunity for voters to hear from party leaders in a live, unfiltered fashion. In Canada, as elsewhere, debates have become crucial points of elections campaigns.

Polling done for the commission on the 2025 federal election shows that Canadians believe debates matter. Close to 90% say debates are important for democracy. The same number want debates in federal elections and expect invited party leaders to participate in them.

[Translation]

The Leaders' Debates Commission has been responsible for organizing leaders' debates in the last three federal elections. As it does in every election cycle, the commission sought to improve the 2025 debates. Following consultations with producers, moderators and participants from here and elsewhere, we made key changes to the format, moderation and production of the debates in 2025.

For the 2025 debates, there was a single moderator, an experienced journalist on the set, rather than the traditional panel of journalists we have been used to seeing in federal election debates. The format was also simplified to encourage leader-to-leader exchanges and to prevent the leaders from constantly being interrupted by the timer. The set design was also simplified to so that the focus would be on the discussion itself.

I would like to take a moment to recognize the contribution that the debates producers, CBC/Radio-Canada, made to these changes.

[English]

The results confirm that this was the right approach. Over 62% of viewers said the debates exposed them to new ideas. The more flexible format placed a spotlight on the leaders and the issues of the campaign, and allowed the leaders more time to express their views. There was also less crosstalk.

More than 80% of people surveyed said that having a single moderator for each debate was effective. Canadians also felt that both moderators were neutral. The commission's post-debate consultations with political parties, experts and other stakeholders also revealed widespread satisfaction with the debate format and moderation. The commission believes that this simple and flexible format has proven its worth and should continue to be used in further debates.

The viewership was the highest on record. More than 19.4 million people tuned into the debates this year. Not only did Canadians watch for longer, but more of them also watched the entire two-hour debate than in 2021.

There was also greater reach and accessibility. The debates were available live on many television outlets, on radio networks and on 60 digital streams in Canada. They were also carried internationally and offered in 13 other languages, including five indigenous languages, American Sign Language,

[*Translation*]

Quebec sign language,

[*English*]

and in closed captioning and described video.

Notably, a broad coalition of news organizations broadcast the debates without the umbrella of a formal media consortium. This marked a turning point, widening the number of organizations that distributed the free signal of the debates. We plan to build on this wide distribution for the next debates.

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

The cost of the debates was also lower than it was in 2019 and 2021, mainly because they were held at a Radio-Canada television studio in Montreal rather than at the Museum of History in Gatineau, which reduced production costs. We also reduced interpretation costs.

As with previous debates, the Leaders' Debates Commission believes that there is room for improvement next time. New challenges arose in 2025, particularly with regard to participation criteria and media accreditation. The commission has made practical recommendations for the next commissioner on how to improve in these two areas. With regard to participation criteria, the recommendation is to use Elections Canada's final list of confirmed candidates rather than the lists the political parties submit to the commission ahead of time. The commission will continue to handle media accreditation, but it recommends that it no longer be responsible for organizing the leaders' press conferences that traditionally take place following the debates.

After three election cycles, we believe that the Leaders' Debates Commission has succeeded in stabilizing the debate environment. There is no longer any uncertainty about whether the debates will take place. They have been held in every election since the commission was created. All invited party leaders have participated and the debates attract record audiences. In our view, the fact that 90% of voters think these debates are important indicates that they are necessary and must continue to be held.

[*English*]

Thank you for your attention. I will now gladly take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We will now turn to questions. We'll go to the Conservatives first, with Mr. Jackson for six minutes, please.

Grant Jackson (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Cormier, for being here. It's a pleasure to meet you.

My first question has to do with your title as the interim leader. I think you just said you've made recommendations for the next commissioner.

I'm curious. Why are you still interim? Is there some delay, or are you passing on the torch, so to speak? If you can, give us some clarity on the process for the appointment of a permanent commissioner.

Michel Cormier: I'm acting commissioner until there's a new commissioner. That is the purview of the minister of democratic institutions. I guess the question should be for him.

Grant Jackson: That's fair enough.

Have there been any consultations between your office and the department about a permanent appointment coming?

Michel Cormier: We submitted our final report on the debates in September with the recommendations. Now we're waiting to see what consequences we'll have from that report.

Grant Jackson: In terms of the costs, in our briefing note that was ably prepared by our analysts, you noted that you had a surplus for this cycle. How well does that leave you financially if there is a sudden election call given the minority Parliament status?

Michel Cormier: If there is an election call, we will get another installment of money to pay for the debates. There is no lack of money. We had a surplus in every cycle—2019, 2021 and 2025—and that money went back to the Treasury Board.

We start over as soon as an election is called.

Grant Jackson: That's fair enough.

Since the last election ended and given the unstable nature of this Parliament, what organizational planning efforts have been undertaken by your office in the event that a sudden election is called?

Michel Cormier: To start, we had to prepare a final report for September. We have five months after the election to submit a report to the minister. We spent the summer doing wide consultations to improve the report and have solutions to the problems that I underlined. We delivered that report on time.

Now we have to be election-ready in case there's an election. That means making sure the contracting for the producers is in line, and that's been taken care of.

As I said, if and when there's a new commissioner, he or she will act on the recommendations we made in this report.

• (1110)

Grant Jackson: In terms of selecting the location in such a sudden situation, will you revert to using the same location as in the past, or are other locations on the table?

Michel Cormier: We always look at different locations. Given that we're in a minority government situation, it's hard to prepare or plan for a fixed-date election. The easiest solution is to do the debates in the producers' studios—Radio-Canada or CBC—because those are available.

If we wanted to do the debates at other venues—let's say where we did them before, at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau—we'd have to deal with events that are already planned, so that's more complicated.

Grant Jackson: I have a couple of more questions, particularly to do with your recommendations on the criteria for participation. I certainly agree with your recommendation in the report on the participation criteria. I'm just wondering whether you could walk us through a bit further how you came to that decision.

Michel Cormier: The decision to....

Grant Jackson: I mean the recommendation to tweak the criteria to ensure that the early invitation situation that occurred is corrected.

Michel Cormier: When we looked at this criteria, we considered using the Elections Canada list, because it's the official list of the election, but after consulting producers and other people, it was deemed that it was too close to the debates themselves. The elections list comes out only a week before the debates, and traditionally, we've always wanted about two weeks to prepare so the parties can rehearse, knowing who they are up against, which is legitimate, and so the producers can prepare the set, the format and the questions. However, after consultations and after the debates, we came to the conclusion that one week was actually enough, even if it made it a bit tighter.

We think the cleanest and easiest solution is to use the Elections Canada list, which is the list of candidates who are on the ballot.

Grant Jackson: I appreciate that very much. Thank you.

With the 20 seconds remaining, I just want to say, particularly on the recommendation regarding the press scrum following the debate, that we certainly believe you made the right decision in the recommendation there as well. I appreciate your work on that very much. I don't know whether you have any brief comments on that, but I just wanted to make sure to put that on the record for you today.

Michel Cormier: Thank you for your support.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Mr. Wilkinson, go ahead for six minutes, please.

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson (North Vancouver—Capilano, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you for joining us today.

Let me start with just a very general question, some of which you touched on in your opening statement. With respect to the overall experience in the 2025 election, what would you say went very well, and what would you say perhaps didn't go quite so well?

Michel Cormier: What went well is that we managed, with the collaboration of the producer CBC/Radio-Canada and other stakeholders, to develop a format that works best for Canadians.

You may remember that in 2021, there was controversy around questions from a moderator—whether they were objective enough or not. We also had surveys showing that Canadians said they hadn't learned that much new information, politically, from the debates. Of course, at the time, we were still in the tradition of having a panel of journalists, so there were journalists coming on stage to ask questions. That changed the dynamic. Also, the time to answer the questions was not as.... Even some leaders told us that they felt they needed more time to talk.

We took all that in and worked with the producers to develop a format that has one moderator, an experienced television journalist who's used to hosting panels and political discussions and who's very familiar with the subject matter. We went with that, and that worked very well.

In the surveys we did after the debates, 63% of people told us they had learned more about the political positions of the parties than they had before the debate. For us, this was tangible information and data that proved we were on the right track. I think that was the highlight of what went well with the debates. Of course, there was the viewership, which was tremendous—19.4 million. That's a lot.

• (1115)

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson: You touched on soliciting feedback. Could you just describe for me how you did that? You mentioned in your opening statement that you did it with some of the stakeholders. You mentioned some opinion polling you did with the public. What was the breadth of the feedback you went out to seek? Were there some general themes that came back, and were there any surprises?

Michel Cormier: We do consultations after every election to prepare a report, to propose improvements, usually. We consulted the four parties that were on stage for the debates. We consulted a number of media experts, organizations and associations to deal with the media accreditation question. We have a panel of experts who are some of the best experts in Canada on polling—how to analyze polls and choose polls—and we included them in the discussions. We have our advisory board, which is made up of very prominent Canadians with a lot of experience. We also canvass producers in other countries to see if they have advice on format and stuff like that. All of this is done virtually, by the way, so we canvass very largely.

We have a poll done by the “Canadian Election Study” of thousands of Canadians to make sure that from election to election, we have their opinion on the same themes to see how they evolve. We also did some focus groups in the hours following the debate to get people's fresh impressions about their experience.

It's a very wide canvass, if you like. The idea is to work to improve the debates for next time.

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson: Were there any surprises in the feedback?

Michel Cormier: I don't recall any surprises. We were all quite familiar, I think, with the issues at hand.

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson: The commission's report notes that it was only CBC/Radio-Canada that submitted a request to produce the debates, whereas in previous years, you've had several submissions. Why was that the case?

Michel Cormier: We didn't have more than one submission in 2021. The difference is that the group that submitted the request was a group of media organizations led by CBC/Radio-Canada, but it included media like CTV and Global—big TV networks. This time, they were not involved in the application to become producers—only CBC/Radio-Canada was—but they did carry the debates. I think that is a great thing, because now we have evidence that even if people are not part of the group that produces the debates and are not directly involved in their production, there is a lot of interest to broadcast them.

We're also trying to broaden the type and number of media organizations that carry the broadcast, because we have to remind ourselves that this is a free broadcast. Any group or organization can have access to the feed of the debate and stream it on their website. We've had a lot of new, smaller media that talk to communities that don't always feel—I'm trying to find the word—concerned by politics. The fact that these smaller media stream the debates on their websites, have discussions on their websites after that and have thousands of people who may not watch the debate on the main networks come to their trusted local media is a very good sign and is very encouraging for the future.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

[Translation]

Ms. Normandin, you have six minutes.

Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Cormier, thank you for being here with us.

I would like to give a bit of a preamble before I ask my questions. I will begin with an excerpt from your report.

The 2025 leaders' debates were considered the best in decades, with both the format and moderation receiving broad acclaim. The Commission's post-debate consultations with political parties, experts and other stakeholders reveal widespread approval of the debate format and its moderation.

I would like to contrast this excerpt with other aspects of the debate and with comments that we heard on our side, or what we heard internally in some cases.

With regard to the logistics of organizing the debate, we know that Jonathan Pedneault's invitation was rescinded at the last minute. We know that there was some confusion surrounding the press conferences, including a last-minute cancellation and security issues. We know that the RCMP had to intervene to ensure the safety of the elected officials who were in attendance. There was also a last-minute change in the time because of *Hockey Night in Canada*. Internally, we heard that communication with the political parties was lacking. We were often informed of changes and of what was happening by journalists rather than by the Leaders' Debates Commission.

Beyond the format of the debate, its content, the moderation and the questions that were asked, if you had to give yourself a score out of 10 for the entire event, including logistics, what would it be?

Michel Cormier: I'm not in a position to give a score, but I freely admit that there were issues.

That said, we want to fix those problems. It's true that the three issues you mentioned created a perfect storm, but now we are focusing on finding solutions to those problems. That involves improving communication with the parties and the various stakeholders, because a lot of people are involved.

Christine Normandin: It is all well and good to want to learn from one's mistakes, but first one has to admit that mistakes were made. You gave a glowing report that talks about how the debates were considered the best in decades and how they had widespread approval from experts and political parties.

Who are these experts?

Michel Cormier: In our opinion, the success of the debate is what people saw on television. I think it was a great success in that regard. There is room for improvement. We readily admit that, and we are working on it. There is no doubt about that. I admit that there were problems, and I can assure you that we will do things differently in the future.

We propose solutions to do just that in the report.

Christine Normandin: I would like you to tell us more about the recommendation that the Leaders' Debates Commission should no longer organize the leaders' press conferences.

Isn't the organization of these press conferences a part of the Leaders' Debates Commission direct mandate? In terms of public interest, the press conferences are just as important as the debates, if not more so, because the leaders are able to provide more detail on certain issues.

If the Leaders' Debates Commission does not organize those press conferences, isn't there a risk that several press conferences will be held at the same time and that smaller media outlets will be unable to send journalists to different locations if the press conferences are not all held at one location?

Is it really in the public interest to abdicate your responsibility to organize press conferences?

Michel Cormier: First of all, organizing press conferences is not part of the Leaders' Debates Commission's mandate. We agreed to handle them to make sure that they were held.

The problem is that we are not sure we can guarantee a sufficiently orderly environment for party leaders. That is why, after discussing these issues with many experts, journalism associations and political parties, we decided that the best way to ensure that things do not go badly is to no longer organize these press conferences.

The journalists who follow the party leaders on the campaign trail have an opportunity to talk to them every day during press briefings. We believe that this way of doing things takes precedence when the debates are over. That does not mean that there will not be any press conferences. However, the Leaders' Debates Commission will not be the one organizing them.

• (1125)

Christine Normandin: It seems to me that these press conferences should be part of the debate and that the Leaders' Debates Commission should take care of them. I am also wondering about the amount allocated for organizing a debate. We know that it is just over \$3 million in an election year. Perhaps it will be a little less the next time around, but that is still a significant amount of money. TVA was prepared to produce the debate, including the press conference, for \$75,000 per party, or \$300,000 total, which is 10 times less.

I would like to hear your comments on the relevance of funding an organization that is going to abdicate responsibility for organizing a really important part of these debates.

Michel Cormier: I think it is up to the political community, the government and the parties involved to decide whether it is relevant to continue to fund this organization.

With regard to the cost of the debates, it is important to point out that it costs a fair amount of money to put together this kind of program and to take care of everything that goes along with it. We are producing two debates, one in English and one in French. People have to travel. There are also equipment rental costs. These are things that cost a fair amount of money.

We are very pleased to have cut the cost of the debates this year. What is more, we provided simultaneous interpretation in five indigenous languages and other non-official languages. That is something that does not happen in other debates. Interpretation accounts for about a third of the cost of the debates. These are hidden costs,

but it is very important that they be included in the organization of these debates because we want to reach as many people as possible and bring these debates to communities that would not otherwise have access to them.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We will now turn to Mr. Van Popta for five minutes, please.

Tako Van Popta (Langley Township—Fraser Heights, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Cormier, for being here with us. Thank you for your testimony so far.

I want to briefly turn back to the media accreditation issue and the post-debate media scrum. I think everybody would agree with you that it did not go well last time. When I first read that your recommendation was for the commission to step away from that and to say that you're no longer going to be responsible for it, my first impression was that it was a bit defeatist: Why didn't you just do the job properly? I understand now that you're also saying that it was never really part of your task anyway.

Why would you have tackled it? Related to that, did the commission organize post-debate scrums in the 2019 and 2021 elections? How did those go?

Michel Cormier: Yes, we did organize press conferences for the leaders after. There was not much controversy, even though we had the same kind of situation—media organizations that others objected to and that managed to ask a lot of questions during the press conferences—but this time we had more than 200 journalists, 60 organizations and a huge press room where everything was happening. I think part of what happened, in terms of the tension in the room, was explained by the fact that everything was centred in one single space.

In our consultations, quite a number of people asked us why we were in the business of organizing press conferences that should be left to the campaigns and to the media, so it wasn't just coming from us. There was much reference to it in our consultations.

Tako Van Popta: Did you come to the conclusion that it was not part of your mandate after things went wrong? Why did you think it was part of your mandate before?

Michel Cormier: We never really considered it to be part of our mandate, but it came with the media accreditation. If we lived in a different world where there was consensus on what journalism is, what a news organization is and what the standards of journalism are, it would be easier, but now we're in a situation where we have a lot of different players that don't agree on the standards of journalism. It creates a very unstable environment in some of these situations. That's unfortunate, but that's the reality.

• (1130)

Tako Van Popta: Did you consult with all the parties about whether this should be part of your mandate or whether you did that part of the job well?

Michel Cormier: Well, we mentioned it. We canvassed the parties on whether we should continue to do this. Some said yes, some said no and some were indifferent.

Tako Van Popta: If you're the commissioner next time, for the next election, you will not organize the post-debate scrum, I take it.

Michel Cormier: No, not if I'm commissioner, but I assume that there will be a new commissioner by the time we get there.

Tako Van Popta: You never know. We have some votes coming up soon.

Michel Cormier: For now, it's a recommendation for the next commissioner.

Tako Van Popta: Okay. Good.

Do I still have a minute?

The Chair: You still have a minute.

Tako Van Popta: Okay.

I'll go to the criteria for deciding who you invite to participate in the debate—which party leaders. You changed the rules mid-course, if my understanding is correct, in the lead-up to the 2025 election debates. Perhaps you could say what was wrong with the old criteria and what's good about the new criteria.

Michel Cormier: After the 2021 debates, we did a post-mortem, and we consulted widely on these questions. One thing that came up—and some other people agreed—is that we thought the criteria were too based on the past performance of parties. If you elected one member of a party four years ago or in the last election and you received 4% of the vote, you were in the debates automatically.

We thought we needed criteria that measured the current strength of the parties to make sure there were viable choices for voters in a current election. Instead of having it so that any of the three criteria could get you into the debate, we said you'd need two out of three criteria. If you already have a member in the House, that's one point. If you also have 4% of the vote in polling done at the start of the campaign, you're in; you have two criteria. If you don't have that but have candidates in 90% of the ridings, that's also a sign of organizational strength that will get you into the debate.

You need two out of those three. We thought that this recognized a party's proven ability to elect members, because it's not that easy. It also looked at the current strength of the parties. Combining both, I thought, was the best way of measuring a party's current viability in the campaign.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll turn to Madame Brière, please.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Hon. Élisabeth Brière (Sherbrooke, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Good morning, Mr. Cormier. It is a pleasure to have you with us.

I would like to continue in the same vein. In your opinion, what are the advantages and risks of transferring the responsibility for organizing the post-debate press conference to a third party or even to the political parties?

Michel Cormier: A press conference will not be held on site. That is the simplest solution. As for the rest, it will be up to other organizations, that is the political parties, to organize this.

I don't see any major risks if the journalists covering the election campaign have continual access to the party leaders. I don't think there is a deficit of democratic expertise here. The leaders will be asked questions the same way as they are every day during the election campaign, at press briefings given by the party leaders.

I don't think this will really change much in terms of the information that is available or in terms of journalists' access to party leaders.

• (1135)

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Are you not concerned that this could compromise transparency, most importantly, or, as you say, journalists' fair access to party leaders?

Michel Cormier: As I already said, in a perfect world, I would be happy to continue to organize these press conferences. However, given what happened the last time, we are in a position where the resulting atmosphere is not conducive to press conferences. It is not the right environment for this type of discussion.

We are not happy about having to make that decision, but we think that it is the most reasonable solution given the situation.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Have you looked at other options or did you decide to rule out the idea of holding a press conference from the outset?

Do you have an advisory board? Were there discussions surrounding this decision?

Michel Cormier: We consulted our advisory board, but we also put together an ad hoc committee of journalists, journalism association representatives, academic media experts and former journalists who worked in the political arena for a long time. There was no consensus. There were a lot of differing opinions on the subject, but many of these groups supported the idea of the commission no longer organizing these press conferences.

When an issue like this becomes so controversial, it casts a shadow over the debate itself. We want to avoid that. If we could guarantee a suitable environment for broadcasting the press conference, then we would do it, but we do not feel as though we can keep running the risk of things going wrong.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Thank you very much.

In your opening remarks, you said that the leaders' debate is a democratic exercise and that we need to reach as many Canadians as possible. The figures show that a larger number of Canadians watched the debates during the most recent election. What is more, a high percentage of Canadians think that the debates are an important part of the election process.

Part of the Leaders' Debates Commission's mandate involves organizing the debates in both official languages. You held the two debates in more than just the two official languages. You had them interpreted into several indigenous languages and some other languages as well.

We read in the report that Public Services and Procurement Canada covered part of the interpretation costs and that, in the future, the department will be requesting a budget to cover all of these costs.

How can we improve the cost effectiveness and efficiency of multilingual broadcasting?

Can you give us more details about how the 15 languages were chosen?

Michel Cormier: We are in the process of verifying whether there are alternatives to using the services of the federal government's translation bureau. Through talks, we have already managed to reduce costs. For example, interpreters from many regions of the country, including the far north, must come to Ottawa to provide interpretation services for the debates. We need to look at whether we now have the technological means to do things differently. That is one thing that we are looking at and that we will discuss with the various stakeholders involved.

As I said, the interpretation services cost a lot of money, but they are very important. We are doing everything we can to reduce spending without affecting the quality of service for voters.

With regard to how we choose the indigenous languages, we consult with indigenous groups to find out the most appropriate languages for which to provide interpretation. We did not make that decision on our own.

Jean Larose, former CEO of the national indigenous broadcaster APTN, is also one of our advisory board members. He has a lot of experience when it comes to broadcasting to indigenous communities across the country. We really depend on indigenous experts when it comes to choosing which languages to interpret. We also consult with CBC/Radio-Canada, the debate producers, which broadcast in indigenous communities.

• (1140)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Given that we have lots of time and I've been fairly generous with the timing already, we'll have Madame Normandin for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

Christine Normandin: I would like to come back to the matter of the experts.

In the answer you gave my colleague, Mrs. Brière, you said that there was not really a consensus among the experts, except with regard to the idea of the commission no longer being responsible for the press conferences.

Yet, according to the report that you submitted and the excerpt that I read to you, the experts who were consulted said that everything went well, that things all turned out wonderfully. Meanwhile, the day after the debate, the president of the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec, or FPJQ, someone who could be described as an expert, said that the Leaders' Debates Commission had failed miserably in its task and that the whole thing was a catastrophe that could have been avoided.

Which experts had positive things to say?

Michel Cormier: They mainly said positive things about the format and the moderation of the televised debate. They said that things went more smoothly than they had in previous debates.

I will admit that there were problems with regard to the media accreditation and the participation criteria. I don't think what the president of the FPJQ said had to do with the quality of the debates, but rather the leaders' press conferences that followed the debates. I want to make that distinction.

I completely agree with you. I take responsibility and recognize that there were problems, and that is why we are now focusing on resolving those problems before the next debates.

Christine Normandin: I want to ask you about costs again because you told me that a large portion of the budget went toward interpretation services. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe you said that interpretation costs accounted for about a third of the budget. Given that you had a \$3.2-million budget for the last debate, am I to understand that the interpretation services cost \$1 million?

Michel Cormier: It cost about \$500,000 for interpretation services for the first two debates. However, the budget allocated for production was \$1.7 million. This time, because of reduced production costs, the total cost of interpretation was about \$1.1 million. We believe that still constitutes an improvement, and we hope to be able to replicate that for future debates.

Christine Normandin: I now want to discuss the other portion of the costs.

I understand that in non-election years there are salary-related issues. We are talking about costs of approximately \$500,000 to \$600,000 a year. The report indicates that this money is used to organize symposiums and best practice exchanges, among other things.

I would like you to tell us about what you heard at the symposiums, the conversations that you had with other people and the best practices that were identified at these events.

Michel Cormier: As I said, we conduct post-debate consultations. Then, we continue consultations with experts, such as pollsters and political behaviour experts, who can help guide some of our decisions.

We also participate in discussions with an international organization in Washington called Debates International, which brings together some 30 countries and organizes election debates. All of this is done virtually, and we exchange notes, advice and best practices. Many people around the world hold debates, so we are drawing on the best possible knowledge to continue improving debates here.

• (1145)

Christine Normandin: Did the issue of organizing press conferences ever come up in those discussions with experts?

Out of curiosity, I would like to know the recommendations that were made by other countries.

Michel Cormier: I don't want to be presumptuous, but I can tell you that very few countries, if any, in this group take care of organizing press conferences after the debates. That is a very Canadian way of doing things.

Christine Normandin: Mr. Chair, I would like you to add 15 seconds to my next round of questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Sure.

We'll have Mr. Lawton, please, for five minutes.

Andrew Lawton (Elgin—St. Thomas—London South, CPC): Thank you for being here, Mr. Cormier.

The Leaders' Debates Commission was established in 2018. In the last seven years, how many events has the commission hosted?

Michel Cormier: Do you mean debates? There were three: 2019, 2021 and 2025.

Andrew Lawton: Okay, but each debate has actually had two—an English one and a French one—so it's six.

Michel Cormier: Yes.

Andrew Lawton: You've done six things in seven years. Is that correct?

Michel Cormier: We've organized six debates in seven years.

Andrew Lawton: Okay.

What do you do on a given day?

Michel Cormier: Pardon me?

Andrew Lawton: What do you do on a given day?

Michel Cormier: What do I do on a given day? We have weekly meetings. We have a small staff. We have a full-time person, who does accounting, finances, administration and a lot of other stuff. I'm part-time, and we have another part-time employee who actually helps us on an hourly basis.

Andrew Lawton: What's your salary range that's been established by the order in council?

Michel Cormier: What is the salary range?

Andrew Lawton: Well, you can offer your specific one, but I know that the range is what's publicly available.

Michel Cormier: I don't know the full range of it. I know what I'm paid.

Andrew Lawton: Are you open to sharing that with the committee?

Michel Cormier: I don't know if that's privileged information from human resources. I actually don't know.

Andrew Lawton: When you were appointed, as I understand it, the range that the order in council stipulated was \$160,000 to \$190,000. Does the salary for your part-time job fall within that range?

Michel Cormier: Yes, but I'm not paid the full amount. I'm paid for two days per week.

Andrew Lawton: Your commission hosts a meeting per week. What else do you do?

Michel Cormier: After each debate, we actually do consultations. We just published a report that is required by our mandate. We prepare for the next debates and we review the participation criteria—in this case, also the media accreditation policy. We hold consultations on some of these questions, and we prepare the contracting. The contracting for the next debates is always a complicated and arduous task because we go through PSPC rules. There's enough for us to be busy enough.

As I said, for the last three cycles, we've been in minority government situations where we had to be on call in case there was an election.

Andrew Lawton: If there had been a majority government or a situation, as in the case after 2021, where there was a de facto majority government for a period of time, you would have had four years. At one meeting a week, you would have achieved about 200 meetings. That's something, but what else would you have done in that four-year period, especially the three years between the election and the year before the following election?

Michel Cormier: If it were a majority government situation, the government could very possibly decide that the debates commission would be suspended for one or two years. Actually, that happened after the 2019 election, but then we had to be called back quite quickly because we went to a minority government situation and the government could have fallen any day. Of course, if there's a majority government, I think you could revisit that part of it.

Andrew Lawton: I'm just having trouble understanding what exactly you do, because if the Leaders' Debates Commission were to go away right now—there was no commission in 2015—it wouldn't mean we would have no debates. In 2015, there was a Maclean's debate and a Globe and Mail debate. We had no shortage of debates.

I believe at another committee meeting, this committee heard testimony by Paul Wells, who was involved with the Maclean's debate. I believe he said they could have run 60 of their debates for the price of the one debate your organization held.

Why is it necessary, and why is it necessary even between elections, to have this commission?

• (1150)

Michel Cormier: Well, maybe you should put that question to the government. We execute the mandate we're given with the resources we're given. I think the debates commission has brought stability to the environment.

I was in the 2015 debates organization, which was quite disorganized, if you like. We didn't know if we would have debates or not until the very end, and it involved a lot of negotiations with the parties.

Andrew Lawton: Five organizations held debates.

Michel Cormier: Those were lesser. I think if you want debates that have the kind of viewership we can deliver, you need the big networks to be involved and you need to widen the distribution, as we've done. We also reach communities that feel disenfranchised by politics, whether they're indigenous communities, other minority language communities or other groups that don't feel part of the system.

Through some of the new emerging media that stream our debates—because it's a free signal—I think we have an impact that debates organized by private organizations cannot have in the same sense, because their debates are proprietary and belong to news organizations. That's a big difference.

Whether all of this is necessary, I think that's open for political debate.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll now turn to Mr. Al Soud for five minutes, please.

Fares Al Soud (Mississauga Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I am not a usual member of this committee, but this is an important study. I say this not only because you've all graciously agreed to have me here, but because open dialogue is fundamental to our democracy, and therefore the readiness of the Leaders' Debates Commission is fundamental to our democracy.

Of course, I suspect few would agree with that statement more than you, Mr. Cormier. You even noted this in your opening remarks, so thank you for being with us today.

I'll jump straight into questions now.

The time of the French language debate during the recent election was moved so Canadians could watch both the debate and the Habs game. Your report indicates that 43% of Canadians watched a

debate, and 87% said that the debates were important to democracy. I'm mindful that there was a 34% increase in viewership since 2021.

What's interesting to me, given these numbers, is the parallel that it creates, because we often hear that Canadians are not interested in political democracy. Nevertheless, I think these numbers show that when the conditions are right, people care and tune in. How do we ensure that the conditions are right as often as possible?

Michel Cormier: Which conditions are you referring to?

Fares Al Soud: I'm talking about the conditions of people watching these debates and having access to these debates.

Michel Cormier: The fact that people expect them and they're expected to happen and that you have a commission whose work it is to organize these things and make sure there's production and wide distribution helps establish the permanency of debates in the political environment. This is hugely important, given that now, with social media and disinformation, people don't know what to believe anymore.

It's one of the rare occasions where they have the leaders of the parties side by side live on stage, unmediated and unaltered by third parties, and can hear what they say and what their propositions are for the problems that face the nation. It's hugely important. The Leaders' Debates Commission plays a part in this architecture of democracy, if you like, and we believe it does have an impact.

Fares Al Soud: My colleague Madame Brière alluded to this earlier, but part of the commission's mandate is to ensure that debates are accessible to all Canadians regardless of where they live or how they consume information. To that point, the debates were available in 15 languages—you kindly referred to this—including five indigenous languages, ASL and LSQ. To that point, the debates were available on 34 television outlets, 10 radio networks and 60 digital streams.

Looking back at the 2025 debates, how effective were your accessibility measures, and what lessons are you applying to improve accessibility in future elections?

Michel Cormier: The big change as of the last election is that people now get information from more than just the mainstream media. Mainstream media is still hugely important and is still the biggest part of the audience, but at the same time, where we can grow the audience is with different streaming models.

We had radio networks that don't usually broadcast the debates do so this time. We had a lot of smaller digital media outlets that reached communities that don't always feel concerned with politics. Widening interest, buy-in and confidence in the debates can work in favour of trust in the political process, hopefully.

• (1155)

Fares Al Soud: In prior contexts, you've mentioned that debates must meet Canadians where they are, including in online spaces that didn't exist a decade ago. You alluded to this just now.

Based on that, how did the commission adapt debate formats and distribution to reach younger and digital first-time voters across streaming services, social media and mobile platforms?

Michel Cormier: We devised with the producers a format that I think was more conducive to capturing people's attention and keeping them watching, because it was more about content and discussion. Leaders had time to actually develop their answers. In this sound bite culture, that doesn't happen very often. I think that helps to attract audiences.

We also made sure it was available on many different technological platforms, whether it was YouTube, TikTok or streams of groups more in tune with these new demographics and young people who do not stay informed the same way I do, which is traditional media, but via new media. Our intention is to keep growing that community of broadcasters and streamers to increase even more both the availability and the viewership of the debates in the next cycle.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

For our witness, I know we discussed the possibility of a short break at noon. However, we will go through. I think there is consent among the parties to do one more round of questions, so we'll just power through.

We will go to Mr. Lawton for five minutes, please.

Andrew Lawton: Thank you.

Mr. Cormier, we discussed last time that there have been three elections in which the Leaders' Debates Commission has been established and responsible for organizing state-run debates. I'm still having a bit of difficulty understanding precisely what the commission's role is between elections. Would you agree to provide to the committee your calendar of what you have done since the last election?

Michel Cormier: I don't necessarily keep a calendar of all the calls and meetings I have, so it wouldn't represent the right picture of what I do.

Andrew Lawton: Do you have a list of things you've achieved or accomplished since the last election that you could provide?

Michel Cormier: I could do that, yes.

Andrew Lawton: Thank you very much.

Just for the sake of the committee, I'll note that as a journalist, before I became a member of Parliament, I had to engage with the Leaders' Debates Commission. You were very gracious in testifying in the lawsuit on press freedom, *Lawton v. Canada*, in which True North, and subsequently Rebel News, was granted authorization to accredit. However, the instinct of the Leaders' Debates Commission in the 2019 election was to draw a line and not permit independent media to attend the debate and the scrums, where there was an opportunity to pose questions to leaders.

In the 2021 election, there was a bit of a different approach. Some independent media, myself included, were accredited. Some were not. The Leaders' Debates Commission once again went to court and was unsuccessful.

Then in 2025, there was a broader accreditation, but in the end, scrums were abruptly cancelled, thus denying independent media the opportunity to ask questions of party leaders.

Why, in every single election, has there been a desire by the Leaders' Debates Commission to prevent certain journalists from accessing the proceedings and asking questions of the leaders of parties in this country?

• (1200)

Michel Cormier: If we go back to 2019, the media that we thought did not deserve accreditation were media that we did not believe adhered to professional standards and that had demonstrated they were more advocates than actual journalists. It was the same thing in 2021.

We lost the cases in court because the court told us that the commission does not have the authority to decide that. Since there is no legal definition of "journalism", the court is not in a position to solve that question, so we lost those two cases.

We took stock of that, and for 2025, we decided to widen the definition of what a media organization is. If you produce content on Canadian affairs, you're in. It's on that basis that we admitted the media.

Andrew Lawton: Anyone can watch the debate on YouTube or on television. The critical difference between being accredited as a journalist by the Leaders' Debates Commission and not being accredited is access to the scrums.

I understand that you're moving away from scrums in the future, but that is precisely the point here. There was an opportunity to say that Canadians deserve access to political leaders, and at every single election, the commission has put up a barrier where only certain journalists—namely elite parliamentary press gallery journalists—meet the criteria for what you constitute as a journalist. Then, when everyone was allowed in, you cancelled the scrums altogether. How is that in keeping with transparency?

Michel Cormier: I take issue with that. We accredited 60 different media organizations this time and a wide variety of new media.

Andrew Lawton: You cancelled the scrums, though.

Michel Cormier: Yes, because we could not guarantee a proper environment for press conferences. I was in the press room during the debates, and there was too much tension and there were too many arguments. The last thing I wanted to do was cancel the scrums. I believe in accountability and access to leaders, but it has become too disruptive for the public interest of the commission and the debates. I'm truly sad about that, but that's the case.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lawton.

We'll turn to Mr. d'Entremont for five minutes, please.

Chris d'Entremont (Acadie—Annapolis, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

[Translation]

Thank you for being with us, Mr. Cormier.

[English]

I want to continue on where Mr. Lawton left off.

Looking forward to the next possible election, whenever it may show up, if we're starting to take all of these other sources of media and trying to find ways to include them in the larger traditional media—CBC/Radio-Canada, CTV—where do we think we're going? Will we be adding everybody who has a podcast mic, or will there be more of an accreditation issue we'll have to seriously consider as we go forward and all these media groups are created?

Michel Cormier: It's a very rapidly evolving question: What is journalism and what is new journalism? The commission is not the body or the forum for litigating those questions. These are social questions that are very important. The commission has neither the capacity nor the mandate to tackle that larger question.

We will abide by the court ruling that we have to admit a wide spectrum of media organizations, and we're happy to do that. At some point, does capacity enter into the equation? As you know, we had 200 journalists this time. That's a lot. That's a big press room. How many can we accommodate? We'll have to discuss this and see, with the next commissioner, what is the best course forward.

• (1205)

Chris d'Entremont: On the other question, you mentioned that CBC/Radio-Canada was the only bidder, really, on the request the last time around, whereas prior to that, we had a consortium and there were a number of different prior offers.

I'm hoping this is not creating a trend that only CBC/Radio-Canada is interested, or that maybe at some point the larger organizations don't want to be producers. What could be the options if

CBC/Radio-Canada or one of the large TV groups decides not to produce something like this?

Michel Cormier: I think we're all aware that media organizations are having financial difficulties for various reasons that I won't get into at this point. It is, I think, a point to consider. What effect does this have on the capacity of major networks to continue to produce the debates? The public broadcaster agreed to step forward for the past three cycles, and I have no reason to believe they wouldn't have the capacity to continue doing so. They have public financing and that helps.

This doesn't mean we're not open to having other people apply to produce a debate. It's an open process, as you know, and there's a very thorough process to go through to prove technical capacity, experience and other criteria to make sure that debates can reach the maximum number of people and be produced professionally.

We'll have to evaluate that if these hypotheses come to pass, but it is a very unstable environment, the media environment now, and people make the choices they have to make.

Chris d'Entremont: I still have a minute or so. Let's be quick.

In the report, you stated that some stakeholders were calling for maybe two types of debates: one with all leaders and then another one with the front-runners.

I wonder if you could make a couple of comments on how you would try to manage that piece.

Michel Cormier: For now, the mandate of the commission is to organize two debates—not two sets of debates, but one French and one English. We've had some consultations, and especially a lot of calls from the public, who would like to have more debates.

In consultations with the parties and with the media and others, we didn't gather there was much enthusiasm for another set of debates, because campaigns are short. If they are for five weeks, two debates would take the best part of a whole week of campaigning.

We have to actually consider these issues, but for now, we don't have the mandate to do this, so it's not on the table.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

[Translation]

Ms. Normandin, you have five minutes.

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to come back to my colleague's questions about the need for an active commission between elections.

As you mentioned in response to my questions, there were logistical issues when organizing the last debate. To once again summarize: Mr. Pedneault's invitation was withdrawn, there were issues with the press scrums, the time of the debate was changed at the last minute because of a hockey game and there was a lack of communication with the parties, which is something I want to emphasize because it was raised a lot internally.

From what I understand, the fact that the Leaders' Debates Commission existed all year and the year before the debate was held and the year before that did nothing to prevent these logistical issues. With regard to quality of content, in the past, we have seen that private networks were able to organize quality debates fairly quickly.

I would like to hear your thoughts about what having a commission that is active between elections provides in terms of added value, since it obviously did not change anything logistically speaking and the content could have been just as good had the commission not been active all that time.

In your opinion, would the content have been just as good if the Leaders' Debates Commission had only become active when the election was called?

Michel Cormier: I think I have already addressed the added value that I think the commission brings. It does things that private broadcasters may not have the means to do. For example, it makes the debates available in indigenous and other languages and it has a much larger distribution network. The commission has the mandate to ensure that the signal for the debates is available for free to anyone who wants to broadcast them, which extends the reach of these debates. We are also continuing to hold consultations and conduct research on fundamental issues, participation criteria and voter behaviour in order to establish a baseline for defining best practices.

I think that the work the commission does between elections has value. Given that we seem to keep ending up with minority governments, we need to be ready to organize debates as soon as an election is called. That requires the commission to be at least somewhat active between elections. If a majority government were ever elected, then we could come back and discuss this issue.

● (1210)

Christine Normandin: One of the criteria you seem to have used to attest to the quality of the debates is the large number of viewers. However, could this not also be attributed to the controversy surrounding the debate? On the day itself, everything we were seeing in the news was about the cancellations and the fact that the press conferences were not going to be held, and that attracted people's attention.

Couldn't that also have increased viewership?

Michel Cormier: I don't know, but stirring up controversy would not be the first thing to come to mind to boost the ratings for the debates.

I think that people are also very concerned about the political issues of the day and that they were really interested in hearing what

the party leaders had to say about the fundamental issues affecting them. I think there was a need for information from party leaders.

What is more, this is one of the only opportunities where people are able to hear the leaders answer questions for more than three or four seconds and see them interact with each other directly without it being mediatized, or changed or distorted by platforms or other players. I think that people grab onto these moments, and we are seeing that the debates are becoming increasingly crucial in election campaigns everywhere.

I think that all of that speaks in favour of the presence of a structure that supports the organization of debates.

Christine Normandin: I have one last quick question.

You mentioned that, in your opinion, not holding a press conference after the debate will not cause a democratic deficit. I find that perplexing and it makes me feel uncomfortable because this is the only opportunity for journalists to ask questions of the various party leaders after they have questioned each other. There is no other opportunity for them to do that during the election campaign. Even if there are journalists on the campaign trail with the parties, the questions generally have to do with the announcements of the day. What is more, not all media outlets have the capacity to follow the parties on the campaign trail or to follow all the parties at the same time.

Do you not think that holding a press conference following the leaders' debates provides added value?

Michel Cormier: I'll give you that, Ms. Normandin. In a perfect world, I would be in favour of on-site press conferences after the debates. It is clear that the press briefings organized by the parties never manage to attract as many journalists. In a perfect world, I would support this process, but we are in a situation where we do not feel that we are able to guarantee a suitable or sufficiently orderly environment for party leaders' press conferences. It would almost be counterproductive.

It gave us no pleasure to come to that conclusion, and we are also not saying that the media is not losing access to the leaders. They definitely are to some extent. However, when it comes to access to the leaders, I mentioned this reality in light of everything that goes on during the rest of the election campaign.

● (1215)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I'd like to thank Mr. Cormier for being here today.

As a reminder to our members, our next meeting will be on Tuesday, December 9, 2025, for our visit of Centre Block. Please meet at the visitor welcome centre at 9 a.m. in West Block.

I shouldn't have to remind you, but please wear long pants. It will be for safety, but it will be cold. The visit is restricted to members of the committee and committee support staff.

Please refrain, if you can, from bringing bags. They'll have to be stored and can't be brought through Centre Block.

That's it. Thank you so much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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