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The Future of Leaders' Debates in Canadian Federal Elections

Colloquium Report

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Colloquium Report: The Future of Leaders' Debates in Canadian Federal Elections

I will expect you [as Minister of Democratic Institutions]...to...bring forward options to create an independent commissioner to organize political party leaders' debates during future federal election campaigns, with a mandate to improve Canadians' knowledge of the parties, their leaders, and their policy positions.

— Excerpt, mandate letter from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to Democratic Institutions Minister Maryam Monsef, December 2015

Introduction

Canada's first televised leaders' debate was held during the federal election campaign of 1968. In the half-century since, these events have become important moments in the political life of the country, giving voters as unfiltered a view of their potential prime ministers as possible in an election campaign.

For most of that period (except in 1980 when parties and broadcasters could not agree to the debate terms), the process worked rather well. The federal party system was dominated by three national political parties, whose leaders were naturally viewed by most citizens as the legitimate participants in national debates; however, even those early debates included the leaders of smaller parties. As for distribution, television was the most appropriate medium to bring this democratic exercise to the highest number of potential voters. At election time, therefore, the country's main broadcasters would form a consortium to host at least one leaders' debate in each of Canada's official languages, with the date and format negotiated with representatives of the participating political parties.

Strains on this consensus emerged during the 1990s, as the support base for the traditional federal parties fragmented. New political parties with strong regional appeal made a legitimate claim, on the grounds of public support as measured by opinion polls, that their leaders belonged on the debate stage as much as the leaders of national parties whose support in some regions had eroded significantly. With as many as six political parties represented in the House of Commons at various stages in this

evolution, issues regarding which leaders could take part in these debates and, more significantly, who was entitled to make that decision became increasingly important.

Technological advancements in the 2000s complicated matters further, as media organizations became multi-platform news providers and citizens changed their news consumption habits dramatically. When the CBC can post written news articles and columns online and compete with print news organizations, and the *Globe and Mail* can post video content and essentially become a broadcaster, questions naturally arise about the primacy of television as the medium of choice for leaders' debates. As citizens increasingly access video news content online, reducing television audience numbers while others abandon cable and satellite distributions system, should debates not also be available on the online sites of a wider range of news organizations? If the leaders' debates are accessible that way, shouldn't news organizations other than the broadcast consortium have the opportunity to organize, produce and distribute debates themselves?

It is in that changing media and audience landscape driven by technology that the "debate about the debates" came to a head in the lead-up to the 2015 general election. Months before the campaign starting gun went off, media commentators and political consultants questioned the continued legitimacy of the status quo, without a consensus emerging regarding an alternative process. Challenged by the incumbent prime minister's decision to refuse to participate in any debate organized by the broadcast consortium, the status quo collapsed. In its place, a broader range of media organizations organized more debates watched by fewer citizens than the previous consortium debates. Decisions on the date, format and participants were negotiated by the host organizations with the political parties that were invited to participate or that indicated a willingness to attend. With limited presence on television, the individual debates were generally watched by only a small fraction of the voters who tuned in to debates in past elections. However, in the spirit of Lazarsfeld's canonical two-step flow theory of communication, legacy and social media coverage of the debates was deemed to be a factor in the campaign, underscoring the political importance of these debates.

Our experience with debates in 2015 exposed a critical deficiency in the conduct of what has become a key element of federal elections. Few are satisfied with the way debates were managed in 2015, and fewer still want to go back to the old ways. The question is, *Where do we go from here?*

About the Project

Shortly after the October 2015 election, the School of Journalism and Communication and the Riddell Graduate Program in Political Management at Carleton

University joined with the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) to bring greater attention to, and help inform, the debate about the debates. They decided to host a colloquium on the future of federal leaders' debates and produce a joint report. In addition, the IRPP agreed to publish opinion pieces on the subject in *Policy Options*, its flagship digital magazine.

The colloquium was held on Saturday, December 5, 2015, at Carleton University.¹ Representatives of all political parties represented in the House of Commons were invited, as were representatives of the media consortium, the media organizations that hosted debates in 2015, academic experts and graduate students, as well as a number of individuals with direct experience with federal leaders' debates. The organizers also invited representatives from the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), Elections Canada and the office of the Minister of Democratic Institutions to attend as observers. While every effort was made to ensure a balance of views would be represented in the room, the final decision whether to attend necessarily rested with the organizations that had been invited.

Prepared by the three partner organizations, this report summarizes the issues that were raised during the colloquium and draws out the main policy points that emerged from the discussion. The event was on the record (and media were present for the plenary sessions), but the report does not quote individual participants directly and refers to certain interventions only in general terms. Thus, while the report has been tremendously enriched by the contributions of all colloquium participants, responsibility for the conclusions drawn and the recommendations made remain that of the authors.²

The Colloquium

The opening plenary of the colloquium provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on the manner in which debates had been organized for the 2015 election. What was the impact of the elimination of the broadcast consortium and the proliferation of the number and types of debates? What was the role of political parties and their negotiators, and what responsibility do they have for the outcome? In what ways were citizens better served — or not served as well — by this new debate process?

From the outset, it was clear that many of the issues to be discussed were highly sensitive ones for many of the participants. As the debate process leading up to the election was not without controversy, there was a sense that we would need to fully air grievances

¹ Please see appendix A for the colloquium program and appendix B for a list of participants.

² This report was prepared by IRPP President Graham Fox, William Fox of the Riddell Graduate Program in Political Management (Carleton University) and Christopher Waddell of the School of Journalism and Communication (Carleton University).

from the past before we could engage constructively about the future. From the point of view of the media consortium members, this frustration was exacerbated by the absence of representatives from most of the major political parties. While some party representatives made commitments to attend, only the Green Party of Canada was represented at the event. The timing of the session was undoubtedly a factor, coming as it did in the post-election transition period for all parties. Nevertheless, the absence was seen by much of the consortium leadership as a slight; it was also seen as an indication that parties tend to engage on the issue of leaders' debates only during the run-up to a campaign — seeing the rules governing debates in tactical terms, dictated by the political considerations of the moment.

Following the opening plenary, participants split into three breakout groups, each one considering a different aspect of the debates issue. The individual session topics were the following:

- 1) the number of debates, timing in relation to Election Day and clear rules for participant eligibility;
- 2) the structure and format of debates; integrating online and social media with mainstream media, including degree of public participation; live dissemination of debates; language of debates; and archiving and terms of use of debate material after debates; and
- 3) the organization and management of debates, including the process for determining venues and covering the costs.

Following the breakout sessions, participants then reconvened for a final plenary to hear reports on each of the smaller sessions and discuss next steps. It must be noted, however, that the tensions that surfaced early in the day never dissipated, which made a meaningful discussion on next steps virtually impossible. Beyond the frustration over the absence of political representatives, however, a more fundamental cleavage emerged as the session progressed: is it possible, or even desirable, to revert to the broadcast consortium model? Some participants (for the most part associated with the consortium) argued in favour of such a scenario, while others advocated moving from the 2015 experience to design a new model in time for 2019.

The day's discussion took place in the knowledge that the recently elected Liberal government planned to address the question of leaders' debates. The Prime Minister has mandated the Minister of Democratic Institutions to bring forward options to create an independent commissioner who will be given the task of organizing the leaders' debates in future federal elections. In this light, the disconnect

at the colloquium over the status quo issue is particularly revealing: while the government has already declared it is moving to the *how* of reform, many important stakeholders are still debating the *whether* of reform. The lack of discussion about even the concept of an independent commissioner to oversee debates during the colloquium highlighted that impasse.

Elements of Consensus Emerging from the Colloquium

There was general agreement among participants on several issues. They include the following:

- > Two separate issues are really involved in discussing the future of debates: first, the debates themselves and how they are organized and produced; second, how the debates are distributed to ensure that they can be seen live by the broadest possible cross-section of voters.
- > Debates need to be held in a format that is meaningful and accessible (although news organizations and politicians differ on how to define meaningful in a debate context).
- > Clear rules for determining who is invited to participate in debates need to be available to and understandable by voters.
- > Voters benefited from having more debates with a range of different formats and content in the 2015 election than in past elections. Future elections should have more than one or two debates.
- > That said, there should be a mandatory minimum of two debates (one in each language) during the minimum 36-day election period.
- > The criteria for debate participation as established by the broadcast consortium for 2015 are broadly appropriate (but must include some provision for exceptional circumstances). The consortium guidelines as planned for the 2015 election included the following:
 - > four debates — two in each language
 - > audience participation and social media engagement
 - > consortium to produce the debates and make them available at no cost to all interested groups
 - > to be invited, parties must
 - have elected MPs in the House of Commons
 - intend to run candidates in all or nearly all constituencies

- have a chance of winning seats (as evidenced by polling history, previous results)
- have a presence in daily political conversation
- have a fully developed platform
- consider the language proficiency of each leader for debates in that language
- have an identified party leader

Issues of Contention

Beyond these areas of agreement, there was discussion about a broad range of other issues on which there was no agreement but which could form the agenda for a further discussion of the next steps in this process.

Who owns the debates?

Who owns the debates is a key question that kept being raised throughout the day but was not answered. In the past, the consortium had de facto ownership because it was the only organization that could produce a television program and distribute it to voters. With changing technology, that is no longer the case either for production or for distribution, although at present the consortium retains the ability to attract the largest audience for live presentation of debates.

The instructions given by Prime Minister Trudeau to his Minister of Democratic Institutions contemplate an independent commissioner assuming ownership of the debate process. It is unclear to whom that commissioner would report or what processes would be available to make proposals about debate procedures, production and participation, and to ensure regular reviews after each election.

Part of the difficulty in reaching a consensus on this basic question is that there is no agreement on the very nature of debates. The media consortium conceives of the debates as a journalistic exercise, aimed at getting at “the truth” by ensuring that leaders are put under intense scrutiny in full view of the voting public. Thus debates are a “television experience” that should be “owned” by the experts in television journalism. To be clear, proponents of this view are overwhelmingly motivated by a genuine desire to fulfill the needs of voters, but that notion of public service is never immune from “production value” considerations. In contrast, other participants viewed debates as an exercise in democracy (not journalism) and were therefore more likely to argue that they should be owned and directed by a body other than a journalistic enterprise.

Can a debate process merge the competing interests of journalists and media organizations, political parties and their leaders, and voters?

Journalists and news organizations want debates to be a platform to hold politicians accountable and to challenge their assertions, looking for winners and losers and the clichéd knockout punch. Political parties want to use debates to speak in an unmediated way to voters. No one knows in an empirical sense what the public wants to find out when it watches leaders' debates. The discussion produced a lot of ideas ranging from the possibility of surveying the public to find out what people think they get and want to get from debates, to the possibility of a series of debates with different formats that could address the objectives of both news organizations and politicians.

Should broadcasters be compelled as a condition of licence to broadcast leaders' debates?

The question whether licensed broadcasters should be compelled to broadcast the debates was raised on several occasions throughout the day, but no consensus was reached because each broadcaster has its own interests. The changing media landscape needs to be considered in this discussion as well. By early 2016, news channels will no longer be part of the basic cable package so they will be available only to those subscribers who select them. Cable and satellite customers also now have the option of subscribing to a minimalist package of channels that could affect the access some voters may have to future debates. In addition, while the CRTC can require certain actions by broadcasters as conditions of their licence, that requirement becomes increasingly difficult to enforce as more broadcasting moves online, potentially beyond the regulatory reach of the CRTC.

If debates must be broadcast as a condition of licence, should political party leaders be compelled to participate in debates that must be carried by broadcasters?

While some proposed that mandatory carriage by broadcasters should mean mandatory participation by party leaders, in practice it is virtually impossible to require this. The ability to turn down an invitation to participate in a debate remains one way a political party can respond to debates, suffering the potential consequence that may flow from that decision. Parties and leaders will always assess what is in their interests and proceed on that course in deciding whether to accept debate invitations. A frequent suggestion was that debate organizers extend the invitation to parties that meet the debate criteria and then proceed to produce the debates with those who wish to participate.

Will debates in 2019 revert to the pre-2011 model led by the broadcast consortium because broadcasters can produce the largest live audience for debates?

Some participants from the former consortium argued for reverting to the pre-2011 model, basing their case largely on their power to attract a mass audience and the program production values they have demonstrated through producing debates prior to 2015. A version of the consortium model was also suggested: using the host broadcaster concept at major sporting events such as the Olympics and World Cup, whereby an organization would be commissioned to produce the event and make it available to whoever wanted to distribute it. To some degree, this addresses the question noted earlier that any proposal for the future of leaders' debates must consider two distinct issues — producing the debates and distributing them. There was no discussion, though, about who would pay for the cost of producing debates. The consortium was created in large part to share the costs of producing two debates (one in each language), which could be up to \$150,000.

Should negotiations on debate format, participation, etc., be held in public rather than in private?

Although there was no official consensus on whether negotiations on the debate process should be public, there appeared to be general agreement that more openness is a good thing because it relates to negotiations surrounding all aspects of the debates. If everyone's positions were public, it would be easier for voters to see the interests of the various participants and more difficult for parties to say one thing in public and something else in the privacy of the negotiating room.

It is likely that such openness surrounding all aspects of the leaders' debates would be part of whatever is proposed by the Minister so more openness surrounding the process should be expected. Her mandate letter also states: "Government and its information should be open by default. If we want Canadians to trust their government, we need a government that trusts Canadians. It is important that we acknowledge mistakes when we make them. Canadians do not expect us to be perfect — they expect us to be honest, open, and sincere in our efforts to serve the public interest."

Is the US model of a presidential debates commission run by the two major political parties worth emulating in Canada?

There was no discussion of the US system, perhaps because the stated premise at the outset of the day was that the meeting was convened with no specific model in mind to replace either the consortium or the juggling of formats, dates and participants that occurred in 2015. The one or two mentions of the US model tended to be dismissive,

suggesting that control by the major parties is not a model worth emulating in a multi-party system.

Is the breakdown of the consortium that has occurred in Quebec inevitable in the rest of the country as well?

Participants from Quebec described the situation now that TVA has pulled out of the broadcast consortium. Debates are still happening with different groups producing them. The debates have been successful in both content and audience numbers, with both French-language debates in 2015 reaching audiences in excess of one million. The participants were split between those who saw the Quebec outcome as a precursor of what will happen in the rest of Canada after 2015 and those who hope to recreate the consortium model for the 2019 election.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The media universe is a dramatically different world from the one that existed when televised leaders' debates were initiated. The lines between print and broadcast media have been blurred to the point of irrelevance, and the cost of entry has collapsed to nearly zero. Moreover, in a social media world, the availability of information is such that, as one participant put it, "You don't have to see something to see it." This is the context in which decisions about the future of leaders' debates will be made.

As stated earlier in this report, there is also a crucial decision to be made about the very nature of these debates. Are they an exercise in journalism or in democracy? As Harvard University's Thomas Patterson argued in *Out of Order*, political reporters opt for a "game" schema for politics, whereas voters opt for a "governance" schema. That inherent conflict was on display at the colloquium, with participants talking about the same exercise — debates — in dramatically different terms. In our view, it must be clearly stated that the debates are an exercise in democracy, not an "editorial" or a "craft" experience for professional television journalists. Debates must, therefore, be organized as a democratic exercise.

This public statement on the nature of leaders' debates should have important ramifications for the manner in which they are organized in future. Put simply, the debates belong to citizens, not to political parties or media organizations. This should lead to two guiding principles as we debate and assess the various options for reform.

First, if the debates belong to the public, it should follow that the rules on the criteria for participation must be decided in full view of that public. An open and transparent process should clearly articulate how debate participants are selected, the

grounds on which others might be refused and the “rules of engagement” for political parties. This debate should occur independently from, and prior to, a public discussion on who should have the responsibility to first produce and then distribute these debates.

Second, we recommend that decision-makers consider the option of appointing a “host broadcaster” — perhaps CPAC — which by mandate would be required to design a debate to advance the democratic exercise and not concern itself unduly with the journalistic integrity of an “editorial” product, as argued by consortium representatives. At first glance, CPAC, as Canada’s designated parliamentary channel, seems a logical candidate to fill that role, but the process should involve decision-makers considering this matter seriously and being open to alternatives, as well as considering the issue of who covers the cost of producing the debates.

Of course, the proposal to designate a host broadcaster raises the important questions: should broadcasters be forced to carry the debates and should leaders be forced to attend? On the former, we recommend that the feed from the debates be made available to all Canadian media outlets, and each media outlet, in turn, can decide whether to distribute it to its audience. That said, news channels should be compelled to carry the debates as a condition of licence. As for the latter question, it is tempting to make debate participation obligatory for the leaders of parties who “qualify” under the terms agreed to by the public. There is an argument to be made that this is unnecessary because voters can exact their price via the ballot box on a leader who chooses not to participate. But there is an equally compelling case to be made that all qualifying leaders should debate each other at least once in each official language over the course of an election campaign. Clearly, more discussion is needed on this issue before it can be resolved.

In addition, the specific issue of the role of the public broadcaster should be examined more closely as well. Are there additional responsibilities that do not apply to commercial broadcasters but that should be considered for CBC/Radio-Canada?

There is also the question of who gets to determine the “rules” for these debates: is it the proposed independent commissioner or a broader group of interested parties?

Finally, the debate about the debates must deal with the probability that other media organizations may wish to host debates outside the frame of the “exercise in democracy” described above. Looking at the 2015 experience, it must be stated that the debates organized outside the consortium were every bit as legitimate as traditional debates. While more consultation is necessary, the consensus at the colloquium was that such debates should certainly be allowed, perhaps even encouraged. And pro-

vided that a minimum number of debates are organized to allow all qualifying party leaders to participate, the design and format of these additional debates can probably be left to the host organization and the party leaders who are invited to participate.

Conclusion

The experience of 2015, while imperfect, signalled a definitive departure from the practices established a half-century ago: there is no going back to a television consortium model for federal leaders' debates. As the saying goes, we can't go home again.

As was made plain by the December colloquium, the airing of grievances among interested parties is not yet complete, but is a necessary step to designing a new process. Moreover, a number of substantive issues remain unresolved and would benefit from more debate.

To that end, we encourage all interested parties — particularly the political parties, the members of the broadcast consortium and the government of Canada — to keep an open mind about the best way forward and the alternatives they might not yet have considered. More dialogue is needed to resolve these issues, which are critical to the health of our democracy.

The three partner organizations propose, if it would be useful, to facilitate a second colloquium, to focus more deeply on some specific unresolved issues highlighted in this report and guide the debate more explicitly toward what could come next. The Liberal government, in the mandate letter for the Minister of Democratic Institutions, has indicated its preferred path forward. With a debate of the issue likely in Parliament at some point in the current government's term, our process could provide an opportunity for all interested parties to conduct a full airing of the range of options available to ensure that leaders' debates remain a major element of future elections.

Appendix A: Program

8:30 – 9:00 a.m.	Registration and coffee
9:00 – 9:10 a.m.	Welcome and introductions Explanation of proceedings of the day
9:10 – 9:30 a.m.	Context and regulatory environment
9:30 – 10:30 a.m.	Opening session What lessons have we learned from 2015? What would the networks consortium have done differently from the past had its debates been held in 2015? What has not been part of the process but should be? What are the key issues we should address today?
10:30 – 10:45 a.m.	Break
10:45 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.	Individual sessions Session A - Number of debates, timing in relation to Election Day and clear rules for participant eligibility Session B - Structure and format of debates; integrating online and social media and mainstream media including degree of public participation; live dissemination of debates; language of debates; and archiving and terms of use of debate material after debates Session C - Organization and management of debates, including process for determining venues and covering the costs
12:15 – 1:15 p.m.	Brown bag lunch
1:15 – 2:15 p.m.	Reporting session - Reports from the individual sessions 20 minutes per session (presentation and discussion) Session A (10 minutes) Session B (10 minutes) Session C (10 minutes)
2:15 – 3:15 p.m.	Concluding session - Conclusions from the discussions and next steps

Appendix B: List of Participants

Elly Alboim	Earnscliffe Strategy Group
James Baxter	iPolitics
Roberta Bell	Carleton University
Jacques Bourbeau	Global News
Catherine Cano	CPAC
Nick Carter	Green Party of Canada
Michel Cormier	CBC/Radio-Canada
Marc-André Cossette	Carleton University
Graham Fox	Institute for Research on Public Policy
William Fox	Carleton University
Wendy Freeman	CTV News
Adam Grodinsky	Student (Carleton University)
Daniel Green	Green Party of Canada
Michael Gruzuk	CBC/Radio-Canada
Susan Harada	Carleton University
Heather Kennedy	Green Party of Canada
Joanne MacDonald	CTV News
Soheil Milani	Student (Carleton University)
Jennifer McGuire	CBC/Radio-Canada
Julian Morelli	Green Party of Canada
Anna Murphy	Student (Carleton University)
Matthew Musgrave	Student (Carleton University)
Alain Pelletier	Elections Canada
Jean Pelletier	CBC/Radio-Canada
Troy Reeb	Global News
Robert Sampson	Elections Canada
Dave Shymanski	CBC/Radio-Canada
Sara Trick	Student (Carleton University)
Natalie Turvey	Canadian Journalism Foundation
Stephanie Vig	Privy Council Office
Christopher Waddell	Carleton University
Paul Wells	Maclean's magazine
Jonathan Whitten	CBC/Radio-Canada



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IRPP
1470 Peel Street, Suite 200
Montreal, Quebec H3A 1T1
Telephone: 514-985-2461
Fax: 514-985-2559
E-mail: irpp@irpp.org