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Reforming federal election debates in Canada

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“The two definitive prerequisites of democracy are the fair and inclusive right to vote and the opportunity to conduct informed, uncensored public discussion of ideas. Debate without voting would be insufficient for the realization of democracy, as would be voting without any public deliberation.”¹

Stephen Coleman

¹ Coleman, Stephen. (2000). “Meaningful Political Debate in the Age of the Soundbite.” In *Televised Election Debates, International Perspectives*, edited by Stephen Coleman, 1-24. New York: St Martin’s Press Inc., 1.

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Foreword

“The debates are not perfect, but they give voters a chance to see candidates on a stage armed with nothing but their character and intellect, confronted not with softball questions from those who want them to look good but challenges on fundamental issues from opponents who have spent as much time on the issues, thought as hard about them, and want to win as much as they do. Debates provide what lawyers call ‘demeanor evidence’—a chance for voters to see how the candidates respond to challenges, on the spot and under stress, to hear the timbre of their voices, to see whether they blink or seem nervous or flustered.”²

- Newton N. Minow

Newton N. Minow, at 83, is the grand old man of American broadcast history. Chair of the *Federal Communications Commission* under President Kennedy, he famously described television broadcasting in 1961 as the “vast wasteland.” (Today, the landscape is incomparably vaster with hundreds of digital channels, and perhaps even more barren with the advent of reality television.) Minow went on to become Chair of the Public Broadcast Service (PBS) and was the driver behind the *International Telecommunication Satellite Consortium*, the body that ushered in the era of satellite communication.

Of all of his broadcast and communication achievements, Minow is probably best known for his role in creating the system of U.S. presidential television debates. He was assistant counsel to Adlai Stevenson, twice Democratic candidate for President who first raised the idea of televising debates. In 1976 and 1980, Minow was co-chair of the presidential debates for the League of Women Voters. In 1986, while a fellow at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, he worked to create the Commission on Presidential Debates, and in 2008 he co-authored the book *Inside the Presidential Debates*, which contains an impressive reform agenda.

In that work, Minow describes the origins of the famous 1960 Nixon/Kennedy debates, and how from the onset, leaders debates had to meet multiple agendas. Those first debates attracted an astonishing audience—two-thirds of the nation’s households with television sets tuned in, and more than 115,000,000 Americans watched at least one of the four debates. The British were impressed with this American innovation: the *Daily Mirror* called the debates “a brilliant lesson from America on how to make an election come vividly alive”³, and other British media suggested that the United Kingdom adopt the idea. As they put it, “set rival leaders together on the same screen and the most partisan of viewers is forced to hear both sides of the question”⁴.

² Minow, Newton N., and Craig L. Lamay. (2008). *Inside the Presidential Debates*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 8.

³ Minow, 2008, 14.

⁴ *Ibid*, 14.

If the success of those debates seems settled today, it was not so at the time. Each of the interests represented in the debates was unhappy at one time or other. The press secretaries for both candidates complained about the composition of the panel of journalists, the networks complained about foregone advertising revenue and programme preemption, academics complained that the process trivialized the issues, while media critics grumbled that the debates were not entertaining enough because the “program’s rigid format reigned in the candidates”⁵. Nobody was happy with the debates in 1960, except the public.

Minow, reflecting his era, writes that the public must care about televised debates because “in modern democracies, including our own, television is the essential medium for political communication”⁶. However, in one key area we have moved beyond the complexities that governed the debates in 1960. Television is not necessarily the medium of choice of political information for 21st century young voters. In its 2008 *Youth Election Study*, the Dominion Institute revealed that more young Canadians now prefer to use the internet (35%) when looking for information than television (31%). It also found that 83% have a *Facebook*⁷ page. While many of Newton’s concerns remain relevant, a new one might be added to them today: how to make debates accessible in the digital age, and to young voters in particular.

Mary Lou Finlay, a distinguished former CBC journalist and a fellow of the Centre for the Study of Democracy, echoes Minow in positing that the standards for debates are that they should be fair (the party interest), informative (the voter interest), and tantalizing (the media interest). With these different interests in mind, Finlay asks the following questions: “What are the obstacles to livelier, more intelligent exchanges of views and information? What formats have worked best, and why? Should there be more debates than there are now? Can debates be made less threatening to the leaders who fear a knockout blow or error, while proving more entertaining and useful to the public?”

To help answer these questions, the Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD) has undertaken a comparative study of leaders debates and put forth an agenda for reform, which has been vetted by an expert roundtable of media, political and scholarly experts.

The modus operandi of the CSD is to research topics thoroughly, most often from a comparative perspective, to propose recommendations based on that research, and then to subject those recommendations to review by public roundtables of experts and concerned citizens. The end-result is always more robust, as it is with Michelle Rogers’ paper “*Reforming Federal Election Debates in Canada*.” A summary of the September 25, 2009 roundtable discussions is contained in Appendix 1.

Three insights gained from the roundtable exchanges led to changes in the recommendations proposed in the initial draft paper. First, while most of the roundtable participants supported the idea of an independent debate commission, the consensus was that it should be formed from a consortium of universities, public

⁵ Ibid, 13.

⁶ Ibid, 3.

⁷ Facebook is a the popular, free, social networking website.

interest groups, and concerned citizens, rather than being too closely tied to an agency like Elections Canada. The model of the non-partisan League of Women Voters (when it sponsored US presidential debates starting in 1976) was more attractive than a government or party dominated model.

Second, participants at the roundtable had many valuable ideas on how to improve the debates and Ms. Trina McQueen made the excellent suggestion that specialty channels like Bravo on culture or the Discovery Channel on the environment could sponsor themed debates. This suggestion has also been incorporated into the paper.

The third major change from the first draft concerns criteria for participation. The paper had initially recommended that Canada adopt the guidelines of the Appleseed Citizen's Taskforce on Fair Debates, inviting participants according to the criteria of standing in Parliament or the polls, and having candidates in a prescribed number of ridings across the country. This had the practical effect of disqualifying the Bloc Quebecois from the English language debate unless they were to make an effort to contest seats outside Quebec. However, the majority of the experts we engaged to critique this study felt that while such criteria made logical sense, that the Bloc has in fact participated in debates in both languages for many years and that there is great value in exposing the English language audience to the Quebec nationalist perspective. This draft recommendation prompted unsolicited responses too. Eric Grenier, for example, sent a thoughtful email commentary that helped convince us that we needed to revise our stance.⁸ He argued "*English Canadians already have a severe lack of understanding of the Bloc. Excluding the Bloc leader from the debates, virtually the only opportunity Gilles Duceppe has to speak to English Canadians because of the lack of attention he understandably, receives in Anglophone media, would only increase this lack of understanding.*" The paper, therefore, adapts the criteria suggested by the Green Party which proposes that invited parties should meet three of four criteria: 1) have a sitting MP, 2) have a full roster of candidates across the nation, 3) be federally funded, 4) have at least 5% support among voters in national opinion polls.

Thanks goes to the participants in the roundtable—Mark Bulgutch, Martin Regg Cohn, Nicholas Fogg, Rudyard Griffiths, John B. Johnson, Anton Koschany, Trina McQueen, John Mykytyshyn, Steve Paikin, Elizabeth May, Robin Sears, Katie Telford, and host Mary Lou Finlay—who shared their personal opinions and insights on debates and deliberated on the merits of our ideas for change. We are grateful for their input, which has strongly influenced the recommendations put forth in this paper.

Thanks also goes to the many Canadians who took time to comment on the initial draft of the paper. Their feedback has enriched the final product.

The CSD thanks the Aurea Foundation for sponsoring this research. The foundation has been a major backer of the institutional reform programme of the CSD, having sponsored the 2008 paper on *Reforming Parliament*, and the forthcoming study on *Renewal of the Public Service*. The Aurea Foundation has a general commitment to improving public policy in Canada, and it has played an especially useful role in

⁸ See Appendix 2

encouraging public debate—the subject of this paper. The Munk Debates (another debates initiative supported by the Aurea Foundation) commissioned a background paper and public opinion survey on Canada’s leadership debates, which has proven very useful to this research. Rudyard Griffiths, co-organizer of the Munk Debates, asserts a point of principle that this study endorses: “Among the advanced democracies, Canada is all but alone in perpetuating an election debate system that is utterly nontransparent, rife with serious conflicts of interest, and technologically a decade behind the times... Elections are held for the benefit of voters, not the parties. And in the case of debates, voters’ interests are better served by an independent, transparent commission than by the current arrangement.”⁹

Thanks too to CSD’s researchers and fellows for all their work on the Leaders Debates project. Mrs. Michelle Rogers has worked previously on the Parliamentary Study, and is the principal investigator and author of the background paper *Reforming Federal Election Debates in Canada*. She wishes to thank in particular Mark Bulgutch for his time spent in interviews for the paper, and Rudyard Griffiths for providing the paper and survey from the Munk Debates. Mary Lou Finlay helped frame the key questions of the study and recruited many of the presenters for the September round-table. Nicholas Fogg, a United Kingdom CSD fellow, arranged a series of interviews in the UK, and contributed to the international comparative aspect of the project. Each of these individuals also participated in the CSD Roundtable on September 25, 2009.

Much appreciation is also extended to Arthur Milnes, another CSD Fellow, for his on-going support and media advice provided. Julie Burch, coordinator of the CSD, who helped organize all the details of the September round-table and who edited this paper, and Lara Fitzgerald Husek and Stephanie Jones who supported her, are also thanked for their efforts.

The Aurea Foundation is dedicated to “facilitating exchanges in the marketplace of ideas to the benefit of all Canadians.” It is hoped that the present study on election debates will advance knowledge and understanding about an important feature of Canada’s electoral system. A feature that, in itself, is supposed to advance the knowledge and understanding of all Canadians.

By Thomas S. Axworthy

Chair, Centre for the Study of Democracy

Executive Summary

The Centre for the Study of Democracy works to further citizen knowledge and engagement in Canada. Though election debates are but a partial means to this end, they are an important part. Always a centre point of campaigns, election debates have

⁹ Griffiths, Rudyard “Take Debate Control Away from the Network,” *The National Post*, September 09, 2008.

arguably become even more important in this digital age. Today, individuals have the power to self-select the information they intake from a multitude of sources. Often, this means choosing information that conforms to their existing views. Election debates, which force the individual to hear opposing positions on the issues may thus be even more important today than they were at the time of the first Kennedy/Nixon debates.

There are four criticisms of the status quo of Canadian election debates:

- 1) They are decisively not transparent, being negotiated in private by highly biased parties;
- 2) They do not follow the democratic principles that guide the rest of the election process;
- 3) Private interests are deeply influential in determining the details of debates;
- 4) The sole medium used to broadcast debates—television—does not provide the most effective means of stimulating public engagement.

Election debates are a public good, and one that is central to Canada's election process. As such they merit the same careful consideration in design that is given to any other aspect of the electoral system in this country. One mission of the Centre for the Study of Democracy is to encourage citizen knowledge and engagement. Leaders debates are one important means to these ends. It is with this in mind that this paper recommends a series of reforms to improve Canada's election debates system:

- 1) Televised leaders debates should be entrenched in the *Canada Elections Act* and *Broadcasting Act*.
- 2) Federal party funding for election campaigns should be contingent upon full participation in leaders debates.
- 3) The *Canada Elections Act* should create the *Canadian Debates Cooperative* (CDC) to organize the debates.
- 4) Debates should be held in both English and French; party leaders should have to qualify for each debate.
- 5) To be included in the debates, parties should meet at least three of the following four criteria: i) 5% support among voters in national polls; ii) a seat in Parliament; iii) a full roster of candidates across the nation; iv) federal funding.
- 6) A series of debates should take place throughout the campaign between party representatives on national and regional themes, and these should be broadcast on complementary specialty channels.
- 7) In the final weeks of the election campaign, two leaders debates should take place; the first one featuring all qualifying party leaders, and the second

featuring the Prime Minister and the party leader from the highest polling opposition party.

- 8) Election debate questions should be broadened to include a wider universe of participants, (perhaps asking former prime ministers to pose questions to the new leaders), and leaders should be permitted to question each other.
- 9) The use of social networking platforms should be exploited to broaden the reach and appeal of election debates.

Introduction-2008, Debating the Debates

"The leaders' debates are arguably the most significant democratic obligation exercised by the Canadian media during an election."¹⁰

Elizabeth May

"In talking about debates, we are talking about a TV show. The goals and the results might be advancing democracy and citizenship, but it is still a TV show. It is not news, nor a documentary, hardly ever drama, and not really a debate – it is a highly choreographed competition where competitors vie to become the winner. More like "So you think you can lead Canada?"¹¹

Trina McQueen

Leaders debates bring a dialogue to critical election issues. During the 2008 Canadian Federal Election, however, the nature of the debate itself became an issue in the campaign. "If any issue created excitement," says Elizabeth May, leader of the Green Party, "it was the media frenzy and public outrage surrounding excluding me, as Green Party leader, from the debate."¹² The events of the 2008 'debate over debates' dramatized an important public policy issue in Canada, and one that bears on the strength of our democracy.

In 2007, foreseeing an issue concerning party inclusion in the 2008 leadership debates, the Network Consortium invited the Green Party to make a presentation stating their case. The Greens suggested four criteria for inclusion, and proposed that parties meeting at least three of these should be invited to debate. The four criteria were that the party should have a sitting MP, should have a full roster of candidates across the nation, should be federally funded, and should have at least 3 or 4 percent in the polls.¹³

The Consortium was grappling, at the time, with precedent setting. If they included the Greens at the time, would they have to do the same forevermore? Moreover, unbeknownst to the public, or to the parties, the Consortium was told in January 2008 that if Elizabeth May were included in the debates, Prime Minister Harper would not participate.¹⁴ At that point they had to decide whether they could hold a debate without the Prime Minister.¹⁵

In August 2008, Blair Wilson, a former Liberal MP, turned independent, joined the Green Party. With nearly five percent of the vote in 2006, an MP in the House of Commons at

¹⁰ May, Elizabeth. (2009) *Losing Confidence: Power, politics, and the crisis in Canadian democracy*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 110.

¹¹ Trina McQueen's comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

¹² May, 2009. 112.

¹³ *Ibid*, 113.

¹⁴ May, 2009, 113.

¹⁵ Phone interview with Mark Bulgutch.

the dissolution of Parliament, ten percent in national opinion polls in the lead-up to the election, and federal funding, the Greens were hopeful they would be invited to debate since, “in order to exclude [them] the Consortium would have to break with its own precedents.”¹⁶ However, in September, the Consortium issued a press release stating that the Leader of the Green Party would not be invited to debate.

Support for May resounded from women’s groups such as the YWCA, respected politicians such as Joe Clark, and the general public, with opinion polls revealing that two-thirds of Canadians approved of Green Party participation in the debates.¹⁷ After 48 hours of excitement, the “old boys club” backed down, and invited May to debate.

The “test of a democracy,” and one that Canada nearly failed, “is how fairly it treats different points of view,” pronounced Thomas Axworthy in his call to include May in the debates.¹⁸ Fortunately, the Consortium heeded the voices of its critics. And, providently perhaps, the issue of the fairness of debates, and the institutionalization of debate rules has resurfaced as a matter of concern to many Canadians.

Democracy and Debates

On at least two occasions the mass public, and not just the chattering classes, focus intently on politics: on voting day, and when millions tune in to watch their political leaders debate election issues.

In Canada, a host of rules govern elections and voting. Federal electoral legislation includes the *Canada Elections Act*, which sets out electoral rights of Canadian citizens, creates the post of Chief Electoral Officer, outlines voter registration, sets election dates¹⁹, limits spending on elections,²⁰ sets regulations for the publication of election results²¹, and outlines general procedures respecting the election of members of parliament. The Chief Electoral Officer reports directly to Parliament, is independent of all political parties, and holds primary responsibility for administering elections and referenda. Elections Canada carries out specific roles and responsibilities under the mandate of the CEO.²²

While Elections Canada and its Chief Electoral Officer are charged with administering Canadian elections under the Act, there is no such body, or legislation governing election debates.

¹⁶ May, 2009, 117

¹⁷ Axworthy, Thomas S. “Canada almost failed major test of democracy; Tory-NDP power play to exclude May revealed willingness to block out alternative viewpoints.” *Toronto Star*, September 13, 2008.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ This was an amendment added to the Canada Elections Act in 1997.

²⁰ This was upheld by the Supreme Court of Canada in *Harper v. Canada (Attorney General)* (2004)

²¹ This section was upheld by the Supreme Court in *R. v. Bryan* (2007).

²² Elections Canada

Of Democratic Concern

Democracy has undergone three waves of evolution.²³ Direct democracy, born in Athens in 500 BC, allowed male citizens to vote on and determine the policies of the state. In the 13th century, the British began to build parliamentary institutions that provided for representative governance of a larger population. Citizens did not decide issues individually as they had in Athens, but elected representatives to do so on their behalves. The third wave—mass democracy—has entailed a process of extending democracy to previously excluded segments. Developments in this wave have included the removal of religious restrictions²⁴ and property requirements²⁵, the extending of suffrage to women²⁶, and the strengthening of the secret ballot²⁷.

Electorates now number in the millions—far beyond the handful of citizens who initially participated in classical democracy, or in the early stages of parliamentary democracy. As such, a well-working democracy today requires a public that is informed and engaged.

In Canada, voter turnout is at an all-time low. In the 2004 federal election, a meager 60.9% of Canadians cast a ballot. In 2008, this dropped even lower to 59.1%. Low voter turnout has been most pronounced among young Canadians (18-29 years of age). In 2004, for instance, turnout in this demographic group was 15 points lower than the national average.²⁸ Civic knowledge is also particularly limited within this group. For instance, even at the end of the 2004 campaign, some 40% of young Canadians were unable to identify the names of the leaders of Canada's political parties.²⁹ These sorts of findings are troubling ones for Canadian democracy.

A 2008 Election Study prepared by *Innovative Research* for the Dominion Institute³⁰ illustrates that, "Canadian political parties have not managed to keep up the pace with wired young Canadians"³¹, an overwhelming portion of whom use *Facebook* (83%), have cell phones (81%), and use the internet (35%) and television (30%) to seek out information. The research indicates that young Canadians who are actively engaged online are more likely to vote, and that 61% of those surveyed supported online voting.³²

²³ Thomas S. Axworthy describes the three milestones in the evolution of democracy: direct democracy; representative democracy; mass democracy, in his article "Nova Scotia: The Cradle of Canadian Parliamentary Democracy", *The Chronicle Herald*, September 21, 2008.

²⁴ In Canada, this was first effected in Nova Scotia in 1798.

²⁵ In Canada, these were first removed in Nova Scotia in 1854.

²⁶ Women were considered as citizens entitled to the Canadian federal vote, and the Nova Scotia provincial vote in 1918.

²⁷ In 1855, New Brunswick adopted this reform, resulting in a decrease of election violence.

²⁸ Gidengil, Elisabeth, André Blais, Patrick Fournier, Joanna Everitt and Neil Nevitte. (2005). "Missing the Message: Young Adults and the Election Issues", *Electoral Insight*, January.

²⁹ cbcnews.ca. "Voter turnout drops to record low." *CBC*, October 15, 2008.

³⁰ Innovative Research Group, Inc. (2008) "2008 Youth Election Study", *Dominion Institute*.

³¹ Chalifoux, Marc. (2008) "Canadian Parties Fail to Engage with New Media and Risk Leaving Young Voters on the Sidelines," *The Dominion Institute*.

³² *Ibid.*

Leslie-Anne Keowne's article *Keeping Up with the Times* uses the Government of Canada's 2003 *General Social Survey on Social Engagement*³³ to determine how Canadians follow the news. She notes that 89% of Canadians follow news and current affairs frequently—95% of seniors and 79% of young adults aged (19-24 years).³⁴ During the 2006 Canadian federal election, Carleton University's school of journalism conducted a study that determined that television news was the dominant source of election information for the public, with CBC and CTV news as the leading channels. This was followed by regional daily local newspapers.³⁵

Since the Kennedy/Nixon debate of 1960, the idea of leaders debates has spread throughout the democratic world. Of forty-four established democracies studied in the mid-1990s, all but four held leaders debates.³⁶ Today a number of countries are seeking to implement debates: Brazil, Ecuador, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, Namibia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, South Africa, Ukraine.³⁷

Stephen Coleman, Director of Studies at the Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government and a lecturer at the London School of Economics, has explored the democratic value of televised debates. He points to numerous aspects of debates which lend to their democratic significance. Nevertheless, he also notes that where debates are staged performances, as opposed to true debates, and subject to overwhelming media hype, "then the claim that debates contribute to liberal democratic culture should be dismissed as hollow."³⁸

To enhance the democratic quality of debates, Coleman suggests that audience participation be increased to reduce their staged and rehearsed nature. He suggests further that debates are viewed with greatest legitimacy when organized in a transparent manner under independent aegis, rather than by corporate or political sponsors. Lastly, he suggests that technology should be used to better disseminate information and encourage public discussion.³⁹

In Canada, the recent inclusion of questions from the public represents a positive move toward greater public involvement in the content of debates. Nevertheless, the status quo of debates in Canada remains far from the spontaneous discourse Coleman envisions (not least because questions are ultimately still selected by the producers of the debates). Canada is also very far from the ideal of transparency in debate administration. Debate negotiations in Canada are closed-door affairs, with the public hearing only those snippets picked up by the media. The decision-making procedures

³³ <http://dsp-psd.tpsgc.gc.ca/Collection/Statcan/89-598-X/89-598-XIE.html>

³⁴ Keowne, Leslie-Anne. "Keeping up with the times: Canadians and their news media diet." *Canadian Social Trends, Statistics Canada, Catalogue No 11-008*, 13.

³⁵ Waddell, Christopher, and Christopher Dornan. (2006) "The Media and the Campaign." In *The Canadian Federal Election of 2006*, edited by Jon H. Pammett and Christopher Dornan, 220-252. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 225.

³⁶ LeDuc, Lawrence. (1990) "Party Strategies and the use of televised campaign debates." Kluwer Academic Publishers, Netherlands.

³⁷ Minow, Newton N., and Craig L. Lamay. (2008). *Inside the Presidential Debates*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 180.

³⁸ Coleman, 2000, 13.

³⁹ Coleman, 2000, 15-23.

and policies of the debates remain secret. And, new technologies have not been employed to potential either. In short, it is time to ask ourselves then, what are the democratic strengths and weaknesses displayed by debates in Canada, and how can we improve upon them?

Importance of Debates

Debates are important to viewers, as they provide the only time that viewers can see their leaders together, free from journalistic spin. Debates are important to the candidates, as they constitute one of the biggest media events of the campaign, and doubtless the best opportunity to reach voters. The final report of the Lortie Commission on Electoral Reform⁴⁰ described the importance of leaders debates as follows:

They stimulate interest in politics, help voters determine the basic issues of the campaign, increase awareness of parties and leaders, and help to legitimize political institutions⁴¹...The debates provide direct and convenient access to information about the priorities of the major contending parties and the personalities of the leaders. Other campaign activities do not provide such quick and easy access to such rich comparative information.⁴²

In her paper for the Lortie Commission, Cathy Widdis Barr studied the effects of the 1984 and 1988 debates and concluded that debates help candidates by providing them with public exposure, aid voters by providing much needed information and by assisting them to assess the personal characteristics of party leaders, and may even have the effect of encouraging those less interested in politics to turn up at the polls.⁴³

Trend and Friedenburt also review the effects of election debates. Their study identifies eight main contributions of televised political debate:

1. By their dramatic nature, debates help stimulate interest in politics and attract very large audiences.
2. They reinforce the partisan views of those who have already decided to support a particular party, that is, they have a confirming effect.
3. Debates may make it easier to recruit campaign workers.
4. Debates result in few conversions or significant shifts in voters' intentions; however, they may be a deciding factor in a tight race, making the difference between election victory and defeat, as in the election of U.S. President Kennedy in 1960.
5. Debates help voters determine what is important and what the basic issues are.

⁴⁰ See below, 26.

⁴¹ Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing. (1991). *Final Report, Volume 1*. Toronto: Dundurn Press. 412.

⁴² *Ibid*, 414.

⁴³ Barr, Cathy Widdis. (1991). "The Importance and Potential of Leaders Debates." In *Media and Voters in Canadian Election Campaigns*, Volume 18 of the Research Studies of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, edited by Frederick J. Fletcher, 157-211. Toronto: Dundurn Press. 145.

6. Debates raise the level of awareness and understanding of problems and party policies.
7. Debates enable candidates to make themselves more widely known or to correct negative aspects of their public image.
8. Debates help legitimize political institutions and encourage the political involvement of young people.⁴⁴

Looking at each of these studies, one inference presents itself. If a key problem with mass democracy in Canada lies in low voter knowledge and turnout, and if leaders debates are an accessible source of political information with the potential to encourage voter participation, then it is clearly worthwhile to explore how these positive contributions of debates might be maximized in Canada.

An Argument for No Debates

Though most analysts argue that debates make a valuable contribution to democracy, there are those who argue otherwise. The first argument, a qualitative one, is that election debates aren't really debates at all, but a "double public press conference for simultaneous interviewing."⁴⁵

The second argument, a theoretical one, is that election debates go against the underlying principles of parliamentary democracy. Critics in both the U.K. and in Australia have opined about the 'presidentialisation' of the parliamentary elections due to debates. Leaders debates present the party leaders as candidates for prime minister or president; critics argue that this is not appropriate in a parliamentary system where electors vote for local riding candidates, and not the leader featured in the debate. These points are examined more fully in the section on the history of leaders debates in the United Kingdom.

The Interests at Stake

There are three sets of interest at stake in leaders debates: the interests of the parties, the interests of the networks, and the interests of the people. The parties seek to present an unwavering candidate, which is often best achieved by a scripted and controlled forum rather than an extemporaneous debate. For their part, the networks look to put on a good show. And, for its part, the public interest rests in citizens acquiring the information they need to make an informed decision on election day.

In Canada, leaders debates are currently controlled by the networks, and negotiated by the parties. They are scheduled to meet the networks' needs of minimizing losses in ad revenue⁴⁶, and are carefully formatted to parties' specifications. While satisfying these private stakeholders, debates are failing to meet the public interest in information. There is thus a need for a rebalancing. As Mary Lou Finlay has observed, a leaders

⁴⁴ Bernier and Monière, 1991, 161.

⁴⁵ Robert Auer in Munk Debates, 4.

⁴⁶ The 2008 Canadian leadership debates were scheduled at the same time as the American Vice-Presidential debates to minimize lost ad revenue.

debate that can educate the public, while meeting political ends and making good TV is the ideal.

How to best balance, and incorporate the interests of all stakeholders is the goal of this project. To that end, this paper studies the history of Canadian debates and assesses international experience. Our hope is that Canadians will debate the debates well before the next election, and that our reform agenda, with its proposals for amendments to the *Canada Elections Act* and the *Broadcasting Act*, will be passed by Parliament.

Various contributors to the Lortie Report also recognized that there are conflicting interests at play with respect to the design of debates but, as one scholar summarizes nicely, “whenever the interest of the media, the parties and the voters conflict, the interests of the voters should prevail.”⁴⁷

Canada

The Debates in Canada

In Canada, there is a range of legislation governing the media’s treatment of political viewpoints and parties. Sections of the *Broadcasting Act*⁴⁸ declare that the programming provided by the Canadian broadcasting system should be varied and comprehensive, providing a balance of information, enlightenment and entertainment for men, women and children of all ages, interests and tastes, and that it should provide a reasonable opportunity for the public to be exposed to differing views on matters of public concern. Section 335 of the *Canada Elections Act* stipulates that every broadcaster shall make available for purchase by all registered parties six and one-half hours of prime time broadcasting. Section 345 of the same Act requires broadcasters to allocate some free broadcasting time to parties for the transmission of political announcements. The *Radio Regulations* s. 6 reads: “During an election period, a licensee shall allocate time for the broadcasting of programs, advertisements or announcements of a partisan political character on an equitable basis to all accredited political parties and rival candidates represented in the election or referendum.”

None of these regulations, however, pertains specifically to televised debates. Indeed, in Canada, there is no legislation governing leadership debates. In their paper for the Lortie Commission, Bernier and Monière contend that this lack of regulation favours, on the one hand, the Prime Minister (who by refusing to participate can, in practice, decide whether a debate will be held or not) and the larger parties (since the networks will always -and often only- invite those parties with seats in the house).⁴⁹

Since there is no relevant legislation, party leaders are not required to participate in debates. This is hardly an irrelevant point since debates are traditionally viewed as being more advantageous to opposition leaders, who do not enjoy the same media exposure as the Prime Minister. The possibility of a leader choosing not to participate is

⁴⁷ Barr, 1991, 146.

⁴⁸ Sections 3(1)(i)(i) and 3(1)(i)(iv)

⁴⁹ Bernier and Monière, 1991, 198.

thus hardly improbable. Of course, as Clarke *et al.* note, it may be becoming increasingly more difficult for leaders to avoid debates.

In Canada, leadership debates are organized by the media and, specifically, the Network Consortium. The Consortium chooses whom to invite, and presents the candidates with a proposal outlining the date, time, number of debates, and other details. Negotiations then take place between the parties and the Consortium to determine the details of the debates including format, length, coverage, camera shots, timing, the provision of water, use of notes, and other minutia.⁵⁰

The Network Consortium is composed of members of the five major networks—CBC, SRC, Global, CTV and TVA, as well as a Chair (currently Robert Hurst of CTV). The debates are completely produced and financed by the Consortium. Each network provides 20% of the funds needed. Other, non-Consortium networks (e.g. Rogers, CPAC, A Channel) are charged to air the debates.⁵¹

The Consortium typically invites a leader to participate if his or her party has representation in the House of Commons and holds at least 5% popular support among voters nationally.⁵² Nevertheless, the absence of strict rules and transparency creates problems. As Rudyard Griffiths describes “their meetings are secret, as is their decision-making process.”⁵³ Bulgutch concurs with this, noting that “there is a sense that what goes on in the room is off the record: no one wants to be quoted, not the network nor the political party *people*.”⁵⁴

A History of Televised Leaders Debates in Canada

Leadership debate in Canada is modeled after the 1960 American Presidential debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. In Canada, as in the U.S., the first debates were organized by the networks, in conjunction with the parties. The second Presidential debates in 1974, however, were sponsored by a third party non-partisan group, the League of Women Voters, while in Canada the debates still remain non-institutionalized.

The first Canadian televised leadership debate was in 1962 between Daniel Johnson and Jean Lesage, organized by Radio Canada for the Quebec provincial election. The first televised federal election debate in Canada occurred in 1968 between Pierre Trudeau (who had won the Liberal leadership earlier that year), Robert Stanfield (Progressive Conservative), Tommy Douglas (NDP) and Réal Caouette (Ralliement des créditistes).⁵⁵

The election of 1968 offered a unique opportunity for the first debates since both major party leaders, Trudeau and Stanfield, were running for prime minister for the first time. Although the idea of a debate was proposed by CBC and CTV at the onset of the campaign, the Liberals insisted that the debate be carried on all networks, include the

⁵⁰ Bernier and Monière, 1991, 185.

⁵¹ Phone interview with Mark Bulgutch, Executive Producer of the Canadian leadership Debates in 1996, 1998.

⁵² Burman, Tony. “The Election Debate Process is a Sham,” *The Globe and Mail*, September 10, 2008.

⁵³ Griffiths, Rudyard. “Take Debate Control Away from the Network.” *The National Post*, September 09, 2008.

⁵⁴ Comments by Mark Bulgutch at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09)

⁵⁵ Jones, Frank. “PM Admits It—Great Debate ‘Pretty Dull’ Stuff,” *Toronto Star*, June 10, 1968.

leaders of all five parties with seats in the house, and be bilingual. As the minority party leaders did not speak French, the final decision regarding language provided for an interpreter, though candidates could push a button to block the interpreter if they wanted to express themselves in both languages.⁵⁶ Further, time was not allocated equally, with the Social Credit leader permitted to participate only in the last forty minutes of the debate.

Taking place in Confederation Hall in the Parliament Buildings, Ottawa, the debate lasted two hours. The format did not allow for rejoinders, and for the most part was an exhibition of leaders restating already well-known positions.⁵⁷

Since debates tend to favour opposition parties⁵⁸, incumbents often decline electoral debates, and Trudeau did precisely this in 1974. The second Canadian televised debate –“Encounter ’79’– did thus not occur until a decade after the first.

For the 1979 debates, the networks decided to exclude Fabien Roy, of the Ralliement des créditistes because his party was running candidates in Quebec only, and he did not speak English⁵⁹. The debates thus consisted of a single, two-hour, English-only event. The networks proposed that non partisan panelists and a moderator be used to “keep things moving”⁶⁰, and so party representatives were called upon to answer questions posed by representatives of the media (David Halton, Peter Desbarats, Bruce Philips), while exchanges and questions between the leaders were controlled by moderator David Johnson, the Principal of McGill University. Each leader made both opening and closing statements, with the debate portion divided into three 30-minute segments during which two of the three leaders discussed a question posed, with cross questioning allowed. LeDuc and Price commented that structurally, ‘Encounter 79’ represented a “compromise between the American tradition of ‘joint appearances’ and the tradition of adversarial politics more akin to question period in the House of Commons.”⁶¹

Although the debates attracted an audience of 7.5 million (nearly half of the English speaking population⁶²) given the high level of media coverage already afforded to the participants, who were all experienced parliamentarians, LeDuc and Price suggest that watching the elections had very little effect on voter behaviour, or the outcome of the election.⁶³ Frederick Fletcher has commented that these debates established the principles for such programmes: i) leaders should relate directly to one another; ii) the content should be of real substance, not just campaign rhetoric; iii) the pace should be

⁵⁶ Bernier and Monière, 1991, 179.

⁵⁷ Toronto Star, June 10, 1968.

⁵⁸ Bernier and Monière, 1991, Barr, 1991,107.

⁵⁹ Bernier and Monière, 1991, 180.

⁶⁰ Fletcher, Frederick J. (1988). “The Media and the 1984 Landslide”. In *Canada at the Polls, 1984, A Study of the Federal General Elections*, edited by Howard Penniman, 161-189. USA: Duke University Press., 182.

⁶¹ LeDuc, Lawrence and Richard Price. (1985) “Great Debates: The Televised Leadership Debates of 1979.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*. Vol. 18, No. 1, 135-153, 138.

⁶² Fletcher, Frederick. (1987) “Mass Media and Parliamentary Elections in Canada.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 12, No. 3, 341-372, 358.

⁶³ LeDuc and Price, 1985, 153.

fast enough to hold audience attention for two hours; iv) production quality should be high.⁶⁴

There were no debates during the 1980 election. The 1984 election debates were, for the most part, similar to those held in 1979, although there were a few significant changes. First, two network debates were held—one in English, one in French. Secondly, privately organized women's issues debate was covered by the networks as a news event⁶⁵—the first such event in North American political history.⁶⁶ More than two-thirds of Canadian adults reported watching at least one of the three 1984 debates.⁶⁷

The 1988 leaders debate solidified the idea that debates were a normal and necessary component of the election.⁶⁸ Both English and French debates were three hours, broken down to one-hour blocks during which a debates were held between two leaders.⁶⁹

In 1993, the established parties objected to the inclusion of the leaders of the Reform Party and the Bloc Québécois—Preston Manning and Lucien Bouchard—which had been proposed by the Network Consortium even before the election was called.⁷⁰ Their greatest objection was that neither party was a national party: the Reform's presence did not extend east of Manitoba, and the Bloc was a Quebec only party. Moreover, because Mr. Manning was not bilingual, it was noted that he would not be able to participate fully in the debates. The leaders and networks, however, did finally agree to extend invitations to the two leaders. Ultimately, Mr. Manning participated in the English debate, but was limited to an opening statement in the French debate, and Mr. Bouchard was granted full participation in both debates.

In 2000, debates were held in each language. A third 'debate' featuring the Natural Law Party, the Marijuana Party, the Green Party, the Canadian Action Party, the Communist Party, and the Marxist-Leninist Party also took place and was broadcast in part by *Newsworld*.⁷¹

The 2004 debates were heavily criticized, being described as a 'two-hour four person shouting match, interrupted by the occasional question.'⁷² In 2006, reacting to this criticism, a more rigid, closed mic, format was imposed. Each leader answered a direct question, and while other leaders were permitted a time-restricted response, no interruptions were allowed.⁷³ This time, the questions were from ordinary Canadians,

⁶⁴ Fletcher, 1988, 181.

⁶⁵ Fletcher, 1987, 359.

⁶⁶ Lanoue, David J. (1991) "Debates That Mattered: Voters' Reaction to the 1984 Canadian Leadership Debates." *Canadian Journal of Political Science*. Vol. 24, No. 1, 51-65, 55.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 359.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 127.

⁶⁹ Blais, Andre and M. Martin Boyer. (1996). "Assessing the Impact of Televised Debates: The Case of the 1988 Canadian Election", *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 26, No. 2.

⁷⁰ Speirs, Rosemary, "TV Networks want Manning, Bouchard in Debates," *Toronto Star*, August 25, 1993.

⁷¹ Attallah, Paul and Angela Burton. (2001). "Television, the Internet, and the Canadian Federal Election of 2000". In *The Canadian General Election of 2000*, edited by Alan Frizzel, John H. Pammett and Anthony Westell. Ottawa: Carleton University Press., 223.

⁷² Attallah and Burton, 2001, 246.

⁷³ Waddel and Dornan, 2006, 246.

videotaped in advance.⁷⁴ While the media felt the event was boring, polls showed a mild-preference for the format by the public.⁷⁵ Significantly, as a result of a proposal by Tony Burman, then Chair of the Network Consortium, four debates were held—two in each language. This was possible given the timing of the election (after Christmas) and the extended campaign period, but was not continued in the following election, which was subject to more typical time constraints.⁷⁶

In 2008, the debates were held in a new, more intimate setting, with five leaders seated around a circular table, instead of debating from behind podiums. However, the biggest story surrounding these debates concerned the exclusion and subsequent inclusion of Green Party leader Elizabeth May. Reviewing the debate, many commentators noted that both the French and English debates displayed a series of attacks from all sides on the incumbent Conservative Prime Minister (the one exception being the opening of the French debate, when all candidates were asked to say something about the person seated to their left).

Challenges to the Status Quo

Elizabeth May's challenge to the *modus operandi* of the debates is not an isolated cry. Indeed, the lack of clear legislation on election debates leaves them open to challenge (both political and legal)

One example illustrates this point well. In September 1988, the CRTC released a public notice, "A Policy With Respect to Election Campaign Broadcasting," in response to an earlier notice seeking comment on election campaign broadcasting issues. It stipulated that s. 3 of the *Broadcasting Act* requiring that the programming provided by Canadian broadcasters "be varied and comprehensive, providing a balance of information, enlightenment and entertainment for men, women and children of all ages, interests and tastes...provide a reasonable opportunity for the public to be exposed to the expression of differing views on matters of public concern", must be applied "when presenting public affairs programs, such as party candidates profiles, features on certain issues, or panel discussions." Regarding debates, it noted that while "it may be impractical to include all rival parties or candidates in one programme...if this type of broadcast takes place, all parties and candidates should be accommodated, even if doing so requires that more than one program be broadcast."

After the 1988 election in November, the Green Party alleged that CBC, CTV and Global had breached the Television Broadcasting Regulations by refusing to include the Green Party in the leaders' debate, and instituted prosecution. The Court of Appeal held, however, in *R. v. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation et al.*⁷⁷, that the debates were not

⁷⁴ Questions were submitted by Canadian citizens, then selected by the Consortium.

⁷⁵ Waddel and Dornan, 2006, 246.

⁷⁶ Phone interview with Mark Bulgutch, Executive Producer of the Canadian Leadership Debates in 1996, 1998.

⁷⁷ [1993] 51 C.P.R. (3d)

partisan in character, and thus were not governed by the relevant section in the Regulations.

In 1995, the CRTC released a further Public Notice after the decision stating that the “Commission will no longer require that so-called ‘debates’ programs feature all rival parties or candidates in one or more programs. The Commission considers that a licensee will have satisfied the balance requirement of the Broadcasting Act if reasonable steps are taken to ensure that their audiences are informed of the main issues and of the positions of all candidates and registered parties on those issues through their public affairs programs generally. The Commission still believes that news coverage should generally be left to the editorial judgment of the broadcast licensee.”⁷⁸

This was subsequently upheld in 2009 after a candidate for the riding of Brant, in the 2007 Ontario provincial elections, lodged a complaint, not because he was denied participation in a televised debate, but because he received less air time than the other candidates. The Commission cited the decision in *R. v CBC*, that debates were not partisan, and therefore not subject to equity requirements of partisan programming, dismissing the complaint.⁷⁹

The Lortie Commission

While the effect, structure, and content of debates has been a highly studied and published topic in the United States, this has not been the case in Canada.⁸⁰ The *Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing* led by Pierre Lortie did, however, include studies on, and recommendations regarding televised leaders debates. Under the direction of prominent Canadian media scholar Frederick Fletcher, a series of reports dealt with a wide range of issues surrounding the media and elections. Notably, Cathy Widdis Barr’s paper outlined the importance of leaders debates and made the argument that, in Canada, they should be mandatory. Similarly, Robert Bernier and Denis Monière coauthored a study comparing televised debates in several democracies “to clarify the relationship between the debate’s format its internal dynamics, its content and its impact”⁸¹ and sought to answer the questions “Who should organize the debates? Who should be allowed to participate? How many debates should there be? How long should they last? When should they take place? What role should journalists play?”⁸²

Despite Bernier and Monière’s advocacy for the institutionalization of the debates⁸³ and proposal to include televised debates under the *Broadcasting Act* and the *Canada Election Act*, the recommendations of the Commission included no such thing.

The Final Report of the Lortie Commission described the viewpoints of all interested parties: representatives from different parties called for the inclusion in the *Canada*

⁷⁸ Public Notice CRTC 1995-44.

⁷⁹ Broadcasting Decision CRTC 2009-184.

⁸⁰ For Canadian studies of Debates, see Lanoue 91, Le Duc 90, LeDuc and Price, 85, 90, and the Lortie Commission.

⁸¹ Bernier and Monière, 1991, 162.

⁸² *Ibid*, 201-206.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 200.

Elections Act of a requirement that one or more televised leaders debates take place at every election; the media claimed that debates are information programming and called for them to remain unregulated and left up to the networks and the parties; more than half of the respondents to a national attitudinal survey favoured a legal requirement that televised leaders debates be held, and half wanted all registered parties to participate.⁸⁴ In the end, the Commission's conclusions surrounding leadership debate were:

- 1) Televised leaders debates should not be required by law;
- 2) All matters of organization should continue to be negotiated among the networks and the parties, subject to the appropriate CRTC guidelines;
- 3) Parties participating in the debates and networks should select a chairperson by the fifth day following the issue of the writs; and
- 4) Televised leaders debates should be closed-captioned and sign language also provided.⁸⁵

The Commission stated: "regulation of the debates might ensure their utility to voters in the short term but at the expense of the capacity to adapt them to changing technologies and the specific circumstances of particular campaigns."⁸⁶ In support of this position, the Commission argued that "once begun, regulation would require the development of a detailed legal framework, with requirements for network broadcast, rules for selecting participants and guidelines on format, [which] would inhibit flexibility and the evolution of the process."⁸⁷ The Commission also felt that the new free time provisions it recommended would provide the necessary equity to all the leaders of registered parties wishing to express their views through the broadcast media.

Calls for Reform

Concerns in Canada are mounting that the same body is expected to both report on the leaders debate and oversee it. Susan Mohammad of Maclean's asks: "why is one of the most important components of the election campaign in the hands of TV networks instead of an independent, non-partisan body?"⁸⁸

Allan Tupper, a professor at UBC, has commented that legislation firmly setting out debates is long overdue. More specifically, he suggests that penalties should be established for when eligible party leaders decide not to participate—as Jack Layton and Stephen Harper initially threatened to do if Elizabeth May were included in the 2008 debates.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 1991, 412.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 416.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 415.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 416.

⁸⁸ Mohammad, Susan. "Our Leaders Debates are Controlled by the TV Networks: Is it Time to Pull the Plug?" *macleans.ca*, September 15, 2008.

⁸⁹ *macleans.ca*, September 15, 2008.

Similarly, Tony Burman, former Chair of the network Consortium, writes, “I believe it is time for Canadians—through the CRTC—to pull the plug on the networks and entrust this vital mission to an independent, nonpartisan 'commission' similar to how it is done in the U.S.”⁹⁰

Rudyard Griffiths, the co-chair of the Munk Debates, and a well-known media commentator, has also criticized the current approach to debate organization. In a *National Post* article entitled “Take Debate Control away from the Networks” he argues that “among the advanced democracies, Canada is all but alone in perpetuating an election debate system that is utterly non-transparent, rife with serious conflicts of interests, and technologically, a decade behind the times.

*... It is high time Canada joined countries such as the United States and France, and establish an independent election-debates commission.”*⁹¹

Others have cautioned against regulation. At the CSD Roundtable, Anton Koshany offered this perspective: “*We have an election system, Elections Canada, run by bureaucrats and rules –do we want that to happen to debates? I think not.*”⁹²

⁹⁰ *The Globe and Mail*, September 10, 2008.

⁹¹ *The National Post*, September 09, 2008.

⁹² Anton Koshany at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09)

United States

Institutionalized Debates

The American presidential debates are sponsored and produced by the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD). Established in 1988 by the Republican and Democratic parties, and headed by former chairs of the National Democratic Committee and the National Republican Committee (Frank Fahrenkopf and Paul Kirk), the Commission is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) corporation. The CPD organized the 1988, 1992, 1996, 2004 and 2008 presidential debates. It was preceded by the League of Women Voters, which sponsored the 1976, 1980 and 1984 debates.

Illustrative of the extent to which parties try to control the debates, in 1987 the League withdrew from debates sponsorship in protest against the influence of the parties. The League's trustees voted unanimously to pull out from the debates, and on October 3rd, 1988, they issued a dramatic press release:

The League of Women Voters is withdrawing sponsorship of the presidential debates ...because the demands of the two campaign organizations would perpetrate a fraud on the American voter. It has become clear to us that the candidates' organizations aim to add debates to their list of campaign-trail charades devoid of substance, spontaneity and answers to tough questions. The League has no intention of becoming an accessory to the hoodwinking of the American Public.⁹³

Following the drama of the League of Women, the two major U.S. political parties helped create the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD). The CPD is responsible for inviting candidates to partake in the presidential and vice-presidential debates, and since 2000 has used the following criteria for judging candidates eligibility: candidates are required

... to meet the constitutional requirements for presidential eligibility, to be officer a sufficient number of state ballots to have at least a mathematical change of securing an Electoral College majority, and to show a level of support of at least 15% of the national electorate as determined by five selected national public opinion polling firms, using an average of those organization's most recently publicly reported results at the time of determination.⁹⁴

The CPD was incorporated in February 1987 with funding from the Twentieth Century Fund. It was created in response to a call from then-chairs of the Democratic and Republican National Committees, Paul Kirk Jr and Frank Fahrenkopf Jr, itself triggered by a recommendation from Harvard and Georgetown Universities to create a nonpartisan presidential debates organization.

The CPD, like other nonprofit organizations, is funded by individual and corporate contributions. Funding for the presidential debates is provided by the host of the debates. Akin to Olympic bids, hosts are chosen from applicants who must meet

⁹³ In Munk Debates, 7.

⁹⁴ Minow and Lamay, 2008, 98.

stringent criteria, including a debate hall with a ceiling height of thirty-five feet, floor depth of one-hundred-forty feet, air-conditioning that will keep the facility below 50% humidity, sufficient electrical capabilities, space for the media, the CPD, the candidates and their aides, parking areas, and three thousand hotel rooms nearby. The host is responsible for the \$7,500 application fee, a payment of \$1,350,000 to the CPD to cover the costs of a single debate, costs of equipping the facilities with electronics, telecommunications and furniture, ground transportation for CPD staff, media and all debate attendees, catering, as well as accommodations in seventy hotel rooms.⁹⁵

A History of Televised Presidential Debates in the United States

The televised debates in America stem from a long history of political debating. As Jamieson and Birdsell wrote about the first televised debates: “if the idea of presidential candidate debates was new, the concept of political debating, even debating in presidential campaigns, was not.”⁹⁶ For candidates to the U.S. House of Representatives, debating on the campaign trail started as early as 1788. Throughout the 1800’s debates occurred between members of Presidential candidates’ camps. In 1858 a debate occurred between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas for the Illinois seat in the United States Senate. In 1940, Wendell Willkie challenged his opponent to a debate, but Franklin Roosevelt refused. A series of radio debates between primary candidates for both the Democrat and Republican camps were held in 1948.

The first televised debates held in the United States were the now famous Kennedy/ Nixon debates of 1960. These were a series of four debates in September and October of that year, some occurring in the studio, and some by video-link.⁹⁷ The power of television was never more apparent to the seventy-seven million American viewers⁹⁸, to whom Kennedy came across as young, tan and fit, while Nixon, with his five o’clock shadow looked tired and old. A 2003 study by James N. Druckerman has now conclusively shown what has been argued for decades: those who watched the debate felt that Kennedy was the victor, while those who listened to the debate on the radio favoured Nixon⁹⁹.

The series of four debates was proposed by CBS and was broadcast from their studios. News reporters and analysts from the network were used as panelists.¹⁰⁰ The debates lasted one hour with candidates responding to questions from the moderator.

⁹⁵ These are the amounts provided for the 2008 Obama / McCain debates.

⁹⁶ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and David S. Birdsell. (1988). *Presidential Debates, The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate*. New York: Oxford University Press., 6.

⁹⁷ Attallah, Paul. (2004). “Television and the Canadian Federal Election of 2004”. In *The Canadian General Election of 2004*, edited by John H. Pammett and Anthony Westell, 264-289. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 275.

⁹⁸ Jamieson and Birdsell, 1988, 120

⁹⁹ Druckerman, James N. (2003) “The Power of Television Images: The First Kennedy Nixon Debate Revisited.” *The Journal of Politics*. Vol. 65, No. 2, 559-571.

¹⁰⁰ Germond, Jack W., and Jules Whitcover. (1979) “Presidential Debates: An Overview.”. In *The Past and Future of Presidential Debates*, edited by Austin Renney, Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 200.

A special Act of Congress was required to set aside the equal time provisions of the Communications Act. Otherwise, the broadcasters would have had to also provide equal time to the many minor party presidential candidates, which would have precluded the debates from happening.¹⁰¹

A debate hiatus of sixteen years ensued while American politics were distracted by matters such as the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal. When debates returned in 1976, Congress refused to set aside the Communications Act, as it had in 1960, to allow for unequal coverage of the two leading presidential candidates.¹⁰² Therefore, an outside sponsor was sought so that the networks could cover the debate as a ‘bona fide news event,’ and thus remain exempt from the equal coverage provisions.

The year before, the League of Women Voters, with \$200,000 in grants from the William Benton Foundation, had organized a series of ‘presidential forums’ during the primaries, which were generally unsuccessful as President Ford and Governor Reagan declined to participate.¹⁰³ In 1976, upon learning that the networks would not sponsor the presidential debates, the League of Women Voters’ Education Fund announced that it would do so, and collected a petition of four million signatures urging the major party candidates to participate in a series of four face-to-face debates (three presidential, and one vice presidential).¹⁰⁴

In contrast to the extensive pre-debate negotiations of 1960, the candidates and the League agreed promptly on the format of the debates. Each of the presidential debates ran for ninety minutes, and took place in different locations. Though recorded in front of a live audience, the networks were not allowed to show audience reaction. Candidates were entitled to recommend panelists, but the final decision as to questioners was made by the Fund’s board. A moderator posed questions to the candidates, who could refute their opponent’s points. Candidates were also allowed opening and closing remarks. The 1976 debates have been criticized by Bitzer and Rueter as having little substance; they argue that the format—asking ninety questions in three debates, with only two and a half minutes to answer—left the audience with little substantive information about the candidates.¹⁰⁵

In 1980 there were two presidential debates and no vice presidential debate. The first presidential debate was between Republican Ronald Reagan and an independent candidate, John Anderson. The second debate was between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.¹⁰⁶ The league had originally invited Anderson to participate fully in a series of four debates, as long as he received a minimum of 15% in the polls by September. However, the Democrats refused to participate in a debate with Anderson, and so the

¹⁰¹ Kraus, in Bernier and Monière, 1991, 163.

¹⁰² Bernier and Monières, 1991,163.

¹⁰³ Alexander, H.E. and J. Margolis. (1978) “The Making of the Debates.” In *The Presidential Debates: media, electoral and policy perspectives*, edited by G.F. Bishop, R.G. Meadow and M. Jackson-Beeck. New York: Praeger. 20.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁰⁵ Bitzer and Rueter in Coleman, 2000, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Abramson, Paul R., John H. Aldrich, and David W. Rhode. (1987). *Change and Continuity in the 1984 Elections, Revised Edition*. Washington: CQ Press, 57.

originally envisioned four debate programme was scrapped.¹⁰⁷ The debates were moderated by a panel of four journalists who each asked two questions of the participants. Three questions were on the topic of foreign defence, four were on domestic and economic issues, and one question asked each candidate to outline the greatest weakness of his opponent.¹⁰⁸

In 1984, three debates were held: two presidential debates between candidates Mondale and Reagan, and one vice presidential.¹⁰⁹ The format used for these debates has been the one followed ever since, save in 1992, when there were three candidates in the debates.

As noted, the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) was created in 1987 and took over the sponsorship of debates from the League of Women Voters for the 1988 election. Though they initially sparred over the ground rules, George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis engaged in two presidential debates, and the vice-presidential candidates in one.¹¹⁰

In 1992, inclusion criteria focused on three factors: “evidence of a national organization, signs of national newsworthiness and competitiveness, and indications of national public enthusiasm or concern.”¹¹¹ On this basis, the CPD invited Ross Perot, an independent candidate, and wealthy Texas businessperson, to participate in the presidential debates.

One of the 1992 presidential debates followed a typical interview format with two-minute responses, and one minute rebuttals. A second debate, however, was in the style of a town hall meeting, with two minute closing statements. This popular style received praise from the media for “breaking out of the tired old format of press panel questioning.”¹¹²

In the 1996 election, Ross Perot was the first and only minority candidate yet to receive a federal subsidy for his campaign. He was not, however, invited by the CPD to participate in the debates as it was determined by the commission that he had no real chance of winning either the popular vote, or the election. Bill Clinton and Bob Dole participated in two presidential debates, and Al Gore and Jack Kemp participated in one vice presidential debate.¹¹³

In 2000, the CPD scheduled four debates—three presidential and one vice presidential. The Republicans sought five debates—one additional vice presidential. However, after negative media spin, Bush accepted the CPD’s debate format. After being excluded from the debates, Ralph Nader, the Green Party candidate, publicly accused the CPD of being

¹⁰⁷ Bernier and Monière, 1991, 164.

¹⁰⁸ Abramson, Paul R., John H. Aldrich, and David W. Rhode. (1983). *Change and Continuity in the 1980 Elections, Revised Edition*. Washington: CQ Press, 44.

¹⁰⁹ Abramson et al., 1987, 57.

¹¹⁰ Abramson, Paul R., John H. Aldrich, and David W. Rhode. (1991). *Change and Continuity in the 1988 Elections*. Washington: CQ Press, 51.

¹¹¹ Minow and Lamay, 2008, 91.

¹¹² David Broder, in Coleman, 2000, 19.

¹¹³ Minow and Lamay, 2008, 92.

'bipartisan' rather than 'nonpartisan.' He reiterated this charge again in 2004 after being excluded from those debates.¹¹⁴

The 2008 debates between Barack Obama and John McCain implemented a more free flowing format than had been seen in previous years. The CPD "wanted a relaxed format that included time for unpredictable questioning and challenges."¹¹⁵ Two of the three presidential debates allowed ninety-second answers to questions, followed by five minutes of open discussion. A third debate took the form of a town hall meeting with questions by uncommitted voters sampled by the Gallup Organization.¹¹⁶ The vice-presidential debates, however, adopted a more rigid format, due to McCain's concern about the inexperience of his vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin¹¹⁷, and allowed only two minutes of discussion per question.

Challengers to the Commission on Presidential Debates

Open Debates, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, criticizes the CPD as being bipartisan, rather than nonpartisan, closed to the suggestion of format change and third party candidates.¹¹⁸ Its founder, George Farah, writes in his book *No Debate: How the Republican and Democratic Parties Secretly Control the Presidential Debates* that the CPD is a bipartisan organization, acting to insulate the major parties from challenge and question.¹¹⁹

In 2004, the Brennan Center for Justice, in conjunction with ten other pro-democracy civic groups¹²⁰ released a report claiming that the CPD "masquerade[s] as a nonpartisan sponsor" and "secretly submits to the demands of the Republican and Democratic candidates."¹²¹ It concluded:

*The consequences of such deceptive major party control are distressing. Candidates that voters want to see are often excluded, such as Ross Perot. Issues the American people want to hear about are often ignored, such as free trade and child poverty. And the debates have been reduced to a series of glorified bipartisan news conferences, in which the Republican and Democratic candidates exchange memorized sound bites.*¹²²

As a solution, the report proposed the Citizen's Debate Commission (CDC) as an alternative presidential debate sponsor. Created in January 2004 by *Open Debates*, the CDC aims to sponsor five ninety-minute presidential debates and one ninety-minute

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 81.

¹¹⁵ Healy, Patrick. "Pact on Debates Will Let McCain and Obama Spar." *The New York Times*, September 20, 2009.

¹¹⁶ Commission for Presidential Debates

¹¹⁷ *The New York Times*, September 20, 2009.

¹¹⁸ *Open Debates*

¹¹⁹ Farah, George (2004) *No Debate: How the Republican and Democratic parties secretly control the presidential debates*. Toronto: Hushion House.

¹²⁰ The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law, The Center for Voting and Democracy, Common Cause, Democracy Matters, Democracy South, Judicial Watch, the National Voting Rights Institute, Public Campaign, Rock the Vote, and the Southern Voting Rights Project

¹²¹ Brennan Center for Justice et al. (2004) "Deterring Democracy: How the Commission on Presidential Debates Undermines Democracy." 3.

¹²² *Ibid*, 3

vice presidential debate. The CDC borrowed from the *Appleseed Citizens' Task Force on Fair Debates* criteria for inclusion.¹²³ It called for including all candidates who appear on enough state ballots to win an electoral college majority and who either: i) register at five percent in national polls or, ii) register a majority in national polls asking eligible voters which candidates they would like to see included in the presidential debates.¹²⁴

The CDC advocates the following format provisions for future presidential debates:

- 1) Follow-up questions must be permitted in every debate.
- 2) At least one debate must include candidate-to-candidate questioning.
- 3) At least two debates must include rebuttals and surrebuttals¹²⁵ (response to the opposing party's rebuttal).
- 4) Response times must not be overly restrictive.
- 5) Candidates may only exercise a limited number of vetoes concerning the election of moderators and panelists.¹²⁶

The Citizens' Debate Commission also proposes the following four basic formats for future presidential debates:

- 1) *Two single moderator debates*: The single moderator format focuses attention on the candidates, rather than on the questioners. At least one of the single moderator debates would include direct candidate-to-candidate questioning, loose time restrictions and minimal interference from the moderator.
- 2) *An authentic town-hall debate*: An authentic town-hall debate would be organized that prohibits the screening of questions and includes a representative sampling of Americans in the audience.
- 3) *A youth debate*: The first-ever youth-run and youth-oriented presidential debate would be established. Young people are increasingly dismayed by and detached from electoral politics. The aims of this debate would be to inspire millions of young adults to tune into the presidential debates, to raise topics not generally covered in the national discourse, and to limit the extent to which candidates are able to anticipate debate questions and give scripted responses.
- 4) *A panel debate*: Historically, panel debates have allowed educated reporters to question the candidates' policy plans and backgrounds. But rather than the panel consisting exclusively of reporters, the Citizens' Debate Commission would

¹²³ A project of the Appleseed Electoral Reform Project at American University Washington College of Law. The Appleseed Task Force on Fair Debates consists of numerous civic leaders, professors and elected officials, including: John C. Brittain, Dean of the Thurgood Marshall School of Law; John Bonifaz, Executive Director of the National Voting Rights Institute; Steve Cobble, former Political Director of the National Rainbow Coalition; Edward Still, Director of the Voting Rights Project of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law; and Rob Ritchie, Executive Director of The Center for Voting and Democracy.

¹²⁴ Citizen's Debate, <http://www.citizensdebate.org/theplan.html>

¹²⁵ In an adversarial process, like a court proceeding, a surrebuttal is a response to the opposing party's rebuttal; in essence it is a rebuttal to a rebuttal.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

assemble a diverse panel of academic, civic, artistic, religious, media, labor and business leaders to ask questions.¹²⁷

United Kingdom

Though Canada inherited a parliamentary system of government from England, leaders debates are one democratic feature that is not shared. Despite several attempts to introduce the practice, leaders in England do not take part in televised election debates.

As in Canada and the U.S., the British rely heavily on popular media for political information. While the American government does not provide public-service airtime to parties during election season free of charge, both the British and Canadian governments do. Unlike Canadians and Americans, however, the British are not permitted to purchase additional airtime for political commercials. Unique to the British Parliament is *Prime Minister's Question Time*, a specific question period introduced in 1961. This televised half hour session provides an opportunity for MPs from all parties to question the Prime Minister on any subject.¹²⁸ In 1992, when being questioned about his willingness to participate in a televised leaders Debate, John Major retorted "we hold televised debates in the House twice a week."¹²⁹

There is, however, considerable public support for the introduction of debates in the UK. In 1997, the *NOP* research group¹³⁰ indicated that 58% of the public would watch a television debate. A more recent study by MORI¹³¹ indicates that 65% of the population would support holding election debates and only 19% would oppose doing so.¹³²

There have also been repeated calls for the introduction of debates in the UK from both scholars and the media. In a 1998 paper, Stephen Coleman argued that

*Procedures for organizing televised debates among political leaders are needed to ensure that the public is served. The failure of 1997 debate negotiations between John Major and Tony Blair indicate that no single party should be able to veto the presentation of a debate. As interactive technology advances, it should be incorporated into the presentation of public debates.*¹³³

In 2000, Austin Mitchell argued that the British are denied this "tool of democracy" because the debates "do not suit the political elite which does not trust the British people, while the people themselves do not have the power to demand it for

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Number10.gov.uk, January 21, 2004.

¹²⁹ Coleman, Stephen. (1998) "The televised Leaders' debate in Britain: from talking heads to headless chickens." *Parliamentary Affairs*. 182(16).

¹³⁰ GfK NOP Social Research has been involved in opinion polling since NOP's foundation in 1957, including general election polling, by-elections, exit polls and surveys measuring public opinion on issues of the day. <http://www.gfknop.com/customresearch-uk/sectors/socialresearch/marketspecialisations/polling/index.en.html>

¹³¹ MORI is part of the Ipsos Group, is a leading UK research company with global reach.

¹³² Mitchell, Austin. (2000) "The Great British Exception." In *Televised Election Debates, International Perspectives*, edited by Stephen Coleman, 104-121. New York: St Martin's Press Inc., 107.

¹³³ Coleman, 1998.

themselves.”¹³⁴ More tongue in cheek, a 2009 article by Paul Waugh of the *Evening Standard* called for debates noting that now “even Iran is having them.”¹³⁵

The push for debates has not been without its critics, however. It has been argued that presidential style debates are unsuitable for a parliamentary democracy where voters do not cast a ballot directly for their national leader, as they do in the U.S., and because the British public are already well acquainted with their political leaders, due in part to the discussions that already take place during *Question Period*.

The U.K. Dissent—No Debates

In the wake of the Nixon/Kennedy debates, the British Broadcasting Corporation unsuccessfully attempted to organize a debate between Alec Douglas Home and Harold Wilson in 1964. Since then, the BBC has pushed to organize national debates, but its efforts have been resisted by the parties.¹³⁶ Wilson refused the challenge from Edward Heath in both 1966 and 1974. Margaret Thatcher refused the challenge to debate three times: James Callaghan in 1979 (with a letter stating ‘*we are not electing a President*’¹³⁷); Michael Foot in 1983; Neil Kinnock in 1987. While there were discussions of a leaders debate in 1992 between John Major and Mrs. Thatcher, none took place.

In 1997, Britain came closer than ever before to holding debates. The Conservatives received a challenge to debate from both the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats put forward three conditions: that the arrangements for the debate be made by an independent body, that voters be able to question leaders directly, and that the debate include three parties. Though the Conservatives had not formally accepted these terms, negotiations began.

With no impartial body to organize the debate, a mess of negotiations took place, with two networks independently contacting each of the three parties. The “*Problem of Paddy*”—the question of whether Paddy Ashdown, leader of the Liberal Democrats, should be included or not—received attention from both the Liberal and Conservative parties. The Conservatives did not want him included at all, but the networks insisted on some form of participation for Ashdown in order to meet their requirement to act fairly and impartially. Negotiations also broke down over how to include Scotland and Wales, and on the nature of the live audience. Leaked negotiation details led to inter-party distrust, which was subsequently aggravated by “the fiasco of the Tory chickens.” As a publicity stunt, actors dressed-up as chickens and followed Tony Blair around accusing him of being scared to debate. In response, other actors were hired by the Labour Party to dress as foxes and upstage the chickens. The chicken episode killed all plans for a televised debate.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Mitchell, 2000, 104.

¹³⁵ Waugh, Paul. *London Evening Standard*, June 12, 2009.

¹³⁶ Minow and Lamay, 2008, 82.

¹³⁷ Coleman, Stephen. (1998) “The Televised Leaders’ Debate in Britain: From Talking Heads to Headless Chickens,” pa.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/51/2/182.pdf

¹³⁸ Coleman, 1997.

In 2005 the BBC aired the program *Question Time*. Three candidates participated in a series of special broadcasts during which each candidate, alone on stage, answered questions from the studio audience and a moderator. Aggressive questioning by audience members was allowed, and the moderator pressed candidates to answer where it seemed they were evading questions.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Minow and Lamay, 2008, 86.

Australia

The tradition of nationally televised leadership debates in Australia is a recent one. As in Canada, the Australians were inspired by the Kennedy/Nixon debates, and have been using a two-candidate debate as a part of their federal campaigns more or less consistently since 1984. Like the Canadian model, the debates are organized by the networks and the politicians.

Philip Senior, of Sydney University, argues in his study of the impact of Australian leaders debates, that debates held since 1990 have influenced voters.¹⁴⁰ In fact, he finds that non-viewers are affected as strongly as viewers of the debates by means of indirect perceptions. This is significant given the declining viewership of the debates in Australia. His 2008 study finds that non-partisans and minor party partisans are most influenced by debates. Major party partisans are affected less, and mostly experience reinforcement effects, although they may be more strongly affected if they perceive that their party 'lost' a debate.

In their paper *Leaders' Debates and Presidential Politics in Australia*, Ian Ward and Mary Walsh suggest that as of 2000 (when the article was written) the future existence of leadership debates in Australia was not assured. Though the general practice of holding debates since their inception in 1984 has created a popular expectation that they will continue, there remains a lack of "agreement about their number, actual format, scheduling, host broadcaster, or even that they should proceed."¹⁴¹ In short, they suggest that it is "too soon to regard televised leaders' debates as an entrenched feature of Australian politics."¹⁴²

In a paper for the Democratic Audit of Australia¹⁴³, John Uhr compares the American two candidate debate model used in Australia with the more inclusive Canadian model.¹⁴⁴ He claims that the U.S. model does not fit Australian circumstances—"a model of leaders' debate derived from a presidential system is not an idea model for a parliamentary system." He makes five suggestions for reform:

- 1) Bring studio audience back before the leaders;
- 2) Replace five seated journalists with one moderator;
- 3) Give the public more time to get the measure of the two leaders; i.e. more debates, not just one, and extend the time to ninety-minutes from 1 hour;
- 4) Rethink sponsors of the debate (he offers the CPD as example);
- 5) Broaden the range of political leaders to include the established parliamentary parties—minor and major.

¹⁴⁰ Senior, Philip. (2008. "Electoral Impact of Televised Leaders' Debates on Australian Federal Elections", *University of Sydney Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 3.

¹⁴¹Ward, Ian and Mary Walsh. (2000 "Leaders Debates and Presidential Politics in Australia." In *Televised Election Debates, International Perspectives*, edited by Stephen Coleman, 43-65. New York: St Martin's Press Inc., 52.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 57.

¹⁴³ Uhr, John. (2004). "The Leaders Debate: How Democratic?", *Democratic Audit of Australia.*, 129.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

A History of Televised Leaders Debate in Australia

In 1956, before the Nixon/Kennedy display, two representatives from each of the Liberal and the Labour parties participated in an experimental, closed circuit, televised debate conducted by the (then) Australian Broadcasting Commission. In 1958 Prime Minister Evatt and his deputy A.A. Calwell faced Primary Industry Minister W. McMahon and Labour minister H.E. Holt in a televised debate chaired by the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. In 1973, the leaders of both major parties engaged in a debate on the eve of a referendum. Hosted by Whitlam's *National Press Club*, the event was broadcast, though not nationally.¹⁴⁵

It was not until 1984 that the leaders of both parties took part in a nationally televised debate during a federal election, in what was dubbed the 'great debate.' Prime Minister Hawke faced Liberal leader A.S. Peacock in a single, one hour, encounter in the studios of ABC in front of an audience of 300. The president of the *National Press Club* acted as a moderator, and sat at a crescent table, along with the two candidates and a panel of six journalists.¹⁴⁶

After his poor performance in the debates of 1984, Hawke refused a debate in 1987. However, in 1990, Hawke and Peacock held a rematch, again in the ABC studios, this time without an audience, and moderated by an ABC reporter. They engaged in two debates, each lasting one hour, during which the leaders were questioned by each other and by a panel of journalists. There was also an impromptu debate on the television show *Current Affairs* early in the campaign. As well as airing a live broadcast of the debate, Channel Nine later aired the debate as a *Sixty Minutes* special.¹⁴⁷

In 1993, two one-hour debates were held at the ABC studios. These enjoyed as much air time as the debates of 1990. As in the previous debates, there was again an impromptu debate on *Current Affairs*, and Channel Nine again aired the debates as a *Sixty Minutes* special. This time, however, Channel Nine gathered 120 people to watch the debates and rate them on an electronic preceptor monitor. This was dubbed the 'worm,' as it appeared on screen to show who the sample audience thought was 'winning.' During the *Sixty Minutes* special, Channel Nine inserted the worm as a ticker across the bottom of the screen throughout the debate.¹⁴⁸

In 1996 the Liberals insisted on a change of venue. The ensuing negotiations put the debates in jeopardy. Eventually it was agreed that Channel Nine would replace ABC as the host network, supply a network moderator and include no audience and no panel. ABC also broadcasted the two debates, each lasting one hour. Channel Nine again created a *Sixty Minutes* special, again showing the 'worm' during a post-debate play-by-play.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Ward and Walsh, 2000, 50.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 52.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 54.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 55.

¹⁴⁹ Ward and Walsh, 2000, 57.

At the 2004 debate, leaders were questioned by a five-member panel, representing each of the major Australian media groups, instead of by a single moderator. The event was hosted by Channel Nine, with ABC as the only other network to air the debates. Channel Nine also aired its customary follow up program featuring the ‘worm.’ The program *Lateline* (on ABC) reported that only one in ten Australians watched the 2004 debate, and they were mostly over 40 years of age. When *Australian Idol* outdid the debates for viewership, critics began to call for third-party organization of the debates.¹⁵⁰

The 2007 debates were hosted by the National Press Club. They became controversial when the Club decided to cut the news feed to Channel Nine, which had broadcast the debate with the ‘worm,’ thereby violating conditions as laid down by the Government.

¹⁵⁰ O’Neill Margot. “Impact of Leaders Debate Questioned,” *Lateline*, September 13, 2004.

Conclusions

A democratic society needs more than just election debates every few years. If these debates are to nourish civic culture they must be embedded in an ever-developing culture of public deliberation: one which utilizes every medium of communication, interactive as well as broadcast, popular as well as erudite. This political need must be addressed in what is an increasingly mediated society where, paradoxically, public civic space is becoming more scarce, and civil political discourse more marginalized, despite the growth of new means of disseminating information and facilitating expansive discussion.

- Stephen Coleman¹⁵¹

The Centre for the Study of Democracy works to further citizen knowledge and engagement in Canada. Election debates play a small but important part in this, not least in a digital age. Today, individuals have the power to self-select the information they take in from a multitude of sources, often choosing information that comports with their existing views. Election debates, which force the citizen to hear opposing arguments on the issues, may thus be even more important today than they were during the time of the first Kennedy/Nixon debates.

The Munk Debates study has outlined four criticisms of the status quo of Canadian election debates (criticisms with which this paper concurs).

- 1) They are decisively not transparent, being negotiated in private by highly biased parties;
- 2) They do not follow the democratic principles that guide the rest of the election process;
- 3) Private interests are deeply influential in determining the details of debates;
- 4) The sole medium used to broadcast debates—television—does not provide the most effective means of stimulating public engagement.

In Canada, televised debates have become entrenched in the election cycle because they are deemed valuable to the election process. However, few stakeholders—be they the public, the politicians, journalists, or broadcasting networks—are totally satisfied with the current structure. To improve this situation, it is necessary to first identify what each of these stakeholders wants.

The Public: Wants inclusion of the most important voices.

- ▶ Canadians want an upfront exchange of views in honest, informative debates between major political players who have a very real chance to affect the everyday lives of citizens.
- ▶ They want a clear “winner.” Debates are not only about the information that is being transmitted; they also reveal character and the ability to remain composed under pressure. Voters need to know that they can trust the character of a leader.

¹⁵¹ Coleman, 2000, vii.

The force of personality matters in debates because it takes incredible stamina and ego to endure what is demanded of politicians.

*The Politicians: **Want to be the most important voice and to be taken seriously by the networks; and to win.***

- ▶ Political parties want a safe place for their candidates to present themselves in the best light possible.

*Journalists: **Want inclusion of the most important voices to promote good discussion and engaging follow-up.***

- ▶ The most important thing anyone can do to ensure thoughtful participation is to allow aggressive, day-to-day journalism to run independently and drive the election process by informing the electorate - those who survive are the ones who succeed.¹⁵²

*Networks: **Want inclusion of the most important voices and to fill airtime.***

- ▶ They are the conduit of the discussion, not the designers or framers. They have the right to preserve journalistic integrity.
- ▶ They want to attract an audience.

Comparative Perspective

"We should forget about the Americans; they had an exciting election but the debates weren't all that good — they were bilateral press conferences for the most part and our roundtable format is much better."¹⁵³

The United States has studied and discussed their presidential debates more than any other democracy where election debates are held. The U.S. ushered the democratized world into the era of televised debate, and more people worldwide pay attention to their presidential elections than to those in any other country.

In 1984, both the Georgetown Centre for Strategic and International Studies, and the Harvard University Institute of Politics independently conducted studies of the U.S. presidential election process and presidential debates.¹⁵⁴ Each study focused on four issues: i) the impact of the debates on the public, ii) sponsorship of the debates, iii) the debate format, and iv) the problem of how to fairly accommodate third party and independent candidates. Both reports recommended institutionalizing the presidential debates.

Although debates have become entrenched in the Canadian electoral process, the analytical literature studying them is sparse. The last major governmental study to

¹⁵² John B. Johnson comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

¹⁵³ Martin Regg Cohn comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

¹⁵⁴ The Georgetown study was led by Republican Mel Laird and Democrat Bo Strauss, its final report was entitled *Electing the President: A Program for Reform* (Commission on national Elections, April 1986). The Harvard study was led by Newton Minow and Clifford Sloan, its final report was entitled *For Great Debates: A New Plan for Future Presidential Debates* (New York: Priority, 1987).

include the subject of leaders debates, the Lortie Commission, was conducted nearly twenty years ago. Public outcry over the initial decision to exclude Elizabeth May from debating in the last elections suggests it is high time to take a fresh look at the way debates are organized in this country.

The public itself appears ready for changes. A recent poll prepared for the Munk Debates by *Innovative Research Group* indicates that 71% of Canadians support turning the organization of the debates over to an independent and nonpartisan debates commission.¹⁵⁵ Now that Canada has debated the worth of debates, and criticized the status quo, the CSD proposal for the reform of the Canadian televised leaders debates should be considered by Parliament before the next election.

Should the debates be mandatory?

"We need to challenge the political parties to participate in a people's debate and create a venue where the political risk for leaders to choose not to participate is increasing."¹⁵⁶

In Canada, given that no legislation covers election debates directly, participation is a voluntary affair. Though the United States uses the Commission on Presidential Debates as a nonpartisan organizing party, the debates are, again, not mandatory. In 1972, foreseeing Nixon's refusal to debate McGovern, the *Boca Raton News* printed:

"We strongly urge the congress to pass some election reforms legislation following this year's November election, which would include provisions making debates mandatory in future presidential races."¹⁵⁷

In Ukraine, election laws require that the media organize and broadcast election debates involving all registered candidates for presidential and parliamentary elections. *Article 19*, a human rights organization focusing on freedom of expression and information, has called this requirement an excessively onerous obligation for the media, and argues that it may not achieve its aim of informing the electorate. The organization opines that free access to airtime for parties and candidates is most effective and recommends the requirement of mandatory debates be amended.

Cathy Widdis Barr's study points to the importance of debates in electorate education. In arguing that they be a mandatory part of Canadian elections, Barr contends:

As the evidence presented in this study demonstrates, voters use this opportunity in a variety of ways that enhance the quality of the democratic process. No individual should have the right to obstruct this process by scuttling a televised debate. This is particularly true given that the individual most likely to refuse to debate is the one who already has the most control over the electoral process – the prime minister.¹⁵⁸

Where leaders debates are an established election tradition, legislation making participation mandatory might seem redundant given the damage that a refusal to

¹⁵⁵ Innovative Research Group. (2008) "The federal election debates poll." *The Munk Debates*.

¹⁵⁶ Rudyard Griffiths comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

¹⁵⁷ "Mandatory Debates". *Boca Raton News*, August 11, 1972.

¹⁵⁸ Barr, 1991, 145.

participate would do to a candidate's campaign. Nevertheless, the 2008 debates do suggest that such reputational risks may not be controlling—as the Conservative threat not to participate in the debates makes clear. Indeed, there is a real possibility that at some point in the future, the parties and the networks will fail to reach agreement on the terms of the debate, and the electorate will be robbed of this important learning opportunity.

“Remember how vapid it is without debates. I feel so strongly about organizations and structures because when you don't have debate, you dramatically enhance the power of the incumbent and tremendously disadvantage the challengers—which does not help democracy.”¹⁵⁹

Moreover, in 2008, in deciding to whom to extend the invitation to debate, the Network Consortium received feedback from the parties condemning May's inclusion. According to the executive producer of the debates, the Consortium was left with the impression that to invite May would mean there would be no debates. In other words, they had to decide who they preferred at the table: a minority party candidate or the Prime Minister. We concur with Bernier and Monière when they write:

It is paradoxical that in a democratic society the refusal of a single individual to debate can deprive all voters of information they need to decide how to vote. It is astounding to think that the law of the land has nothing at all to say about televised debates, which have profoundly changed election campaigns but are nevertheless left entirely to the discretion of the parties and the television networks.¹⁶⁰

However, Consortium insider Mark Bultgutch admits,

“The networks caved in at the prospect of doing a debate without Harper or Layton, but the lesson to be learned is that the people really do have the power. The networks don't have to take the pressure or blink next time. Politicians must realize that they pretty much have to debate.”¹⁶¹

This paper proposes an amendment to the *Canada Elections Act* making leaders debates a legislatively sanctioned aspect of Canada's election law. Debates would occur during each federal election. Invited candidates would not be required to participate, however, federal funding of the party's campaign would be contingent upon full participation in the event.

Who should organize the debates?

While the United States does benefit from an organizing body, the CPD has not been without its critics. Minow, who led the Harvard study that recommended the creation of a sponsoring body, now calls for increased transparency in the operations, financing and governance of the CPD.¹⁶² Indeed, it is now widely recognized that transparency in election debates is essential.

¹⁵⁹ Robin Sears comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

¹⁶⁰ Bernier and Monière, 1991, 200.

¹⁶¹ Mark Bultgutch comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

¹⁶² Minow, 2008, 118.

In their current state, the Canadian debates belong to the networks, which must cater to the politicians to ensure participation. Consistently, all aspects of the decision-making processes are kept secret from the public, and the decisions are ad hoc—i.e. there have been no consistent rules that would assist transparency and accountability.

Many Canadians have called for the creation of an independent body to oversee election debates, among them Tony Burman, Rudyard Griffiths, and members of the Green Party. A research report by the Munk Debates suggests that either wholesale reform take place, with “the creation of an independent, fully funded, *Electoral Debate Commission* that would have full control over the negotiations of the debates, the fund raising for the events, and distribution of content”, or that there be an improvement to the status quo to “make the process more transparent, and to hold the parties that are privy to the negotiations more accountable.”¹⁶³

“This is a journalistic operation and we should approach this with caution. We could consider having a truly independent body assisting debates, but if networks do not have pride of ownership or production, will they promote the debate and give it a prominent spot in the schedule? Or will it open an argument between private and non-profit?”¹⁶⁴

This paper proposes an amendment to the *Canada Elections Act* to form the *Canadian Debates Cooperative (CDC)*, a truly independent body to assist the debates. A sensible choice to run the debates would be an association of Canadian Universities who would self-select to host (e.g. Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto). They would be advised by a board with equal representation from the public, politicians, and network executives, all of whom they would choose. This board would be tasked with challenging the political parties to participate in a people’s debate that helps Canadians make informed electoral choices.

The Cooperative would be funded by Elections Canada and would serve to regulate election debates. A comprehensive policy manual would be created with consensus by the parties, which would be applied consistently to leaders debates, rather than the current, ad hoc system of decision-making. The amendments dealing with election campaigns would be included in the *Broadcasting Act*

Who should pay for the debates?

In the United States, the burden for financing the presidential debates falls on the host, who applies for the privilege. The costs of running the debates can be in the millions as the host must provide the venue (and be responsible for any changes required to meet CPD guidelines), accommodations for candidates and entourage, media rooms, and seating for a vast audience. In Canada, however, the debates take place in studio, without an audience. Currently, as the networks are the producers and decision makers of the debates, full funding also comes from the Consortium.

¹⁶³ Munk Debates. “Research Report on Independent Debates Commission.” 3.

¹⁶⁴ Trina McQueen comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

Given that it is a television show, says Trina McQueen, “*taking the networks out of doing TV is to rob the delegates of a source of expertise in attracting the audience that is necessary for an engaging debate.*”¹⁶⁵ Thus, while the influence of the networks needs to be reduced, their obligations must be maintained. In the words of Robin Sears, “*They [the networks] are owners of a privilege and one of their obligations is to air coverage of political campaigns.*”¹⁶⁶ Others told us that given that private networks use public airwaves, it is not so much to ask them to give up two hours of airtime, and no compensation should be provided for doing so.

However, because our position is that there needs to be a greater number of debates during elections, **this paper recommends that as with other aspects of the electoral system, debates should be publicly funded through Elections Canada.** Private networks choosing to air the debates would be recompensed for lost advertising revenue. Thus, there would be no disincentive to providing the Canadian public with debates programming.

Should the debates be in English and French?

*“Regarding the idea of bilingual debates, I looked at CBC archives from 1968, some say it didn’t work but I think it did (though I have a bilingual background). Bilingual debates would allow for a more national debate and for more debates generally.”*¹⁶⁷

Though language was a critical issue at the inception of Canadian election debates, it is no longer much of one because, since 1984, debates have been held in each language. This seems to be the one consistent feature of the debates, and the one area where most interested parties have been able to agree.

Over the past 25 years there have been as many debates in French as in English, with the same participants in each language (although Preston Manning and Stockwell Day did not speak French, they still participated in the French debate by making opening statements). **This paper proposes to maintain equivalent French and English debates, however participants would have to meet criteria, for each debate individually** (*criteria outlined on P.43*).

Who should be allowed to participate?

*“The best way to improve the system is not putting the bar so low as to let anyone in.”*¹⁶⁸

In the United States, a 15% popular support rule is currently in place, and is supported by Minow in his review of the Presidential debates.¹⁶⁹ This rule has resulted, almost exclusively, in a debate between only the Democratic and Republican candidates for president. In Australia, debates also occur only between two candidates.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Robin Sears comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

¹⁶⁷ Katie Telford comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

¹⁶⁸ John Mykytyshyn comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09)

¹⁶⁹ Minow, 2008, 113.

“Today’s US debates are orchestrated by the two parties – no one gives lip service to the debate as a significant political discourse with influence.”¹⁷⁰

The Green Party, in 2007, suggested to the Consortium that invited candidates should meet three of the following four criteria: i) have a sitting MP, ii) have a full roster of candidates across the nation, iii) be federally funded, iv) have at least 3-4% in the opinion polls. While in the international literature Canada is recognized for leading the way toward inclusive debates, the issue of who ought to participate in debates remains a contentious one in Canada—as the controversy surrounding Elizabeth May’s participation in the 2008 debates makes clear. The guidelines in the U.S., created by the Appleseed Citizen’s Task Force on Fair Debates, and put forward by the Citizen’s Debate Commission, the CPD’s biggest opposition, is to invite candidates according to two criteria: registering at 5% in national polls, and having candidates on a majority of state ballots.

While an earlier draft of this paper recommended that Canada adapt the Appleseed guidelines, the practical effect of these would be to disqualify the Bloc Quebecois from the English language debate due to lack of candidate presence nationally. English speaking Quebecers demanded to hear, in their own language, proposals for governance in their province; others asked if the Bloc might make an effort to run a candidate in every riding in order to qualify for the English debate. We were persuaded that the Bloc’s inclusion is an effective way to expose the English language audience to the Quebec nationalist perspective. As Katie Telford puts it, *“The West cares a lot about what the Bloc has to say and wants to know their opinion.”¹⁷¹*

¹⁷⁰ John B. Johnson comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

¹⁷¹ Katie Telford comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

Therefore, adopting the criteria suggested by the Green Party, **this paper proposes that the right to participate in each of the English or the French debates should require that a candidate meet three of the following four criteria:**

1. be a member of a political party with at least 5 percent support in national opinion polls;
2. be a sitting MP
3. be a member of a federally funded party;
4. be a member of a federal party that has a full roster of candidates across the nation.

The Bloc, for example, would qualify to participate in both the French debate and the English language debate because it meets criteria 1, 3, and 4. The Green Party would qualify for both language debates as it meets both the popular support, and the candidate requirements.

What should the format be?

“Regardless of format, three million people keep watching. It is a game show of sorts and we must introduce elements to make it more appealing: risk, surprise, adventure, confrontation, sacrifice, etc. I think we could introduce these to debates and still have them be an illuminating exploration of politics. A more engaging format which maintains democratic seriousness is possible.”¹⁷²

This question encompasses many sub-categories, including, when, where, how many debates, the role of the moderator, the role of the candidates, and the general rules the debates should follow. In Canada, the format of debates varies from one debate to the next. As the Munk Foundation puts it “no two debates have had either the same format, or negotiation process.”¹⁷³ Regarding format, it can be argued that each debate is a reaction to the previous ones. According to Mark Bulgutch,

Minow, in his proposed reforms to the U.S. presidential debates, suggests a “less formal and more spontaneous” debate, “without canned speeches, and with opportunities for the candidates to question one another and for citizens to question candidates directly.”¹⁷⁴ He believes that having journalists ask all the questions is simply “the wrong way to go”, as their interests lie in the creation of controversy and exciting news coverage.¹⁷⁵

In their paper for the Lortie Commission, Bernier and Monière explore considerations such as the number of debates that should be held, their length, and their location. They point to the cases of France, Germany and Denmark, all of which hold debates at the end of the campaign, noting that this format enables their electorates to better assess the leaders as issues are tabled, restricts strategic holdouts on positions, and limits the extent to which viewers can be to be swayed by journalistic post-debate rhetoric. This

¹⁷² Trina McQueen comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

¹⁷³ Munk Debates, 13.

¹⁷⁴ Minow and Lamay, 2008, 105.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 107.

might, however, grate party interests, which tend to favour campaigning time after the debate in case of poor performance. Accommodating these two positions, Bernier and Monière advocate two debates—one held at the onset of the campaign to pique public interest and a second held a week before election day.¹⁷⁶

Bernier and Monière support separate English and French debates (as they consider the bilingual debate experiment of 1968 unsuccessful), but do not specify whether they intend that a debate be held in each language both at the beginning and at the end of the campaign. In any case, they do suggest that four debates would be the maximum supported by viewer interest, (each with a running time of two hours). They also advise doing away with single-issue debates, save where a particular issue dominates the campaign.

This paper supports Tony Burman's 2006 decision to increase the number of election debates. We propose that a series of election debates be held weekly, throughout the campaign. The inclusion of more debates would solve some of the problems for networks, while providing a livelier sense of what's going on than the repetition and standard speech that we currently have. Representatives, *not party leaders*, chosen by the qualifying parties, would debate substantive policy topics such as foreign, economic, environmental, and youth policies. Included would be debates on specific areas of interest aired on the complementary specialty channels. For example, the History Television would air debates on citizenship, the Business News Network would show a financial debate, Discovery would tackle healthcare, MTV would target youth-specific issues, and Bravo would host an Arts and Culture debate. Further, some of the debates would be regionally focused, dealing with one region at a time and its issues. This paper recommends that publicly funded networks should be required to carry these weekly debates. The private sector should be invited to air the debates, though doing so would be voluntary.

*"I particularly like the idea that debates should include different members of political parties on different issues; it would get away from the cult of personality and the over-concentration of power in the PMO."*¹⁷⁷

Approximately two weeks before the election date a leaders debate should take place, featuring party leaders and covering a range of critical national issues. The following week, one week before the election, one final leaders debate should be held between the Prime Minister and the leader from the party highest in the polls.

*"A match-up of 1:1 is probably the best compromise – isolate two figures and have them do a debate, but make it fair to all players by having many debates."*¹⁷⁸

These recommendations address the British and Australian concerns of 'presidentializing' the debates. Through this system, the electorate is exposed not only to Prime Ministerial candidates, but to party representatives such as cabinet ministers,

¹⁷⁶ Bernier and Monière, 1991, 204-205.

¹⁷⁷ Elizabeth May comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

¹⁷⁸ Robin Sears comments at the CSD roundtable on televised leaders debates (09.25.09).

party critics and prominent candidates. If election debates serve to better acquaint the public with the debaters, reforming the system to feature more party members would acquaint the public with entire parties, and with each party's experts on key policy issues.

What is the role of the media?

With the advent of a *Canadian Debates Cooperative*, the organizing role of the media would be greatly reduced. Currently, as producer and funder of the Canadian leaders debates, the media Consortium has made the major decisions about participation and format of the debates. Its role also extends to the selection of questions, and to placing members of the media on the debates panel.

Ponders Trina McQueen, *if the networks no longer have pride of ownership or production, will the debate be promoted as effectively as it has been and given a prominent spot in the broadcast schedule?*

To accommodate this concern, **this paper proposes an independent, transparent and publicly responsive commission (with balanced stakeholder representation), to make decisions on participation and format.** While the debate questions should continue to reflect media interests, as they presently do, the scope should be broadened to include a much wider universe of participants. The Liberal Democratic Party of the United Kingdom captures this dimension well with their assertion that “the key determinant of whether such a debate enhances democratic participation will be the ability of the voters to ask questions of all party leaders directly.”¹⁷⁹

Questions should not come only from journalists, particularly during the weekly debates throughout the campaign. Local experts, policy analysts and members of the public should be able to direct questions to the candidates, and candidates should be able to direct questions to each other. Moreover, similar to Minow's suggestion that former presidents question new candidates, former Prime Ministers could submit questions to election debate participants, particularly during the final two leaders debates.

A recurring theme in proposals to reform election debates is the recommendation that debates move into the digital age. As Minow writes:

*Without question, the Internet had the potential to improve the character of our politics by providing more and better-quality information to more people. Democracy, after all, depends on access to multiple and competing sources of information...*¹⁸⁰

Each election debate should be broadcast on television, and be available online for those viewers who prefer to tune in at their convenience. Each debate should be followed by a live online discussion in a forum where a party representative would be present to field further questions and comments from the public and critics. Indeed, the Commission could also experiment with local, regional or national online debates.

¹⁷⁹ In Coleman, 2008, 15.

¹⁸⁰ Minnow and Lamay, 2008, 102.

We concur with Coleman that, “debate lies at the heart of democracy.”¹⁸¹ Public deliberation is a necessary precondition to informed citizen voting. Organized election debates can make a significant contribution to such deliberation. The existing system in Canada, while contributing to this process, can be greatly improved. This study offers an agenda by which this can be achieved.

Summary of Recommendations

- 1) Televised leaders debates should be entrenched in the *Canada Elections Act* and *Broadcasting Act*.
- 2) Federal party funding for election campaigns should be contingent upon full participation in leaders debates.
- 3) The *Canada Elections Act* should create the *Canadian Debates Cooperative* (CDC) to organize the debates.
- 4) Debates should be held in both English and French; though party leaders should have to qualify for each debate.
- 5) Party inclusion criteria should be three of four: i) 5% support in national polls; ii) a seat in Parliament; iii) a full roster of candidates across the nation; iv) federal funding.
- 6) A series of debates should take place throughout the campaign between party representatives on national and regional themes, and these should be broadcast on complementary specialty channels.
- 7) In the final weeks of the election campaign, two leaders debates should take place; the first one featuring all qualifying party leaders, and the second featuring the Prime Minister and the party leader from the highest polling opposition party.
- 8) Election debate questions should be broadened to include a wider universe of participants, (perhaps asking former prime ministers to pose questions to the new leaders), leaders should be permitted to question each other.
- 9) The use of social networking platforms should be exploited to broaden the reach and appeal of election debates.

¹⁸¹ Coleman, 2008, 1.

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Appendix 1: Notes from the roundtable

Televised Election Debates in Canada: Reality TV or Useful Political Discourse?

These notes present a summary of the presentations and comments made on September 25, 2009 at a public roundtable hosted by the CSD at Queen's University, in response to the draft of this paper.

Setting the Stage: Are Canadians tuning in or turned off?

Thomas S. Axworthy

(Chair, Centre for the Study of Democracy)

- Our Centre has three main purposes, and among them is a particular commitment to encouraging citizen engagement and broader sense of citizenship.
- Academe must try to promote this public discourse and networks should be fair (unbiased), informative, and tantalizing in delivering messages.
- Thank you to the sponsors, Aurea Foundation.

Michelle Rogers

(Author of "FIT Debates—Fair, Informative and Tantalizing: Reforming federal election debates in Canada")

- The basic premise of the paper is that there are three positions at stake - media, politicians, the people - and we need to put people at the forefront.
- Credit for the idea behind the paper goes to Mary Lou Findlay.
- Paper includes a case study of four countries: Canada, US, UK, Australia—first interest is the Canadian perspective (difficult to research).
- Highest point of contention in reaction to the paper seems to be inclusion criteria—which does not include Bloc Quebecois in the English debate.
- English Quebecers very concerned with this idea; need to understand in their own language what is happening within their province.
- The Globe & Mail felt that having weekly debates would diminish quality and that penalizing candidates for non-participation would be non-democratic. They also wrote that the idea of a 1:1 debate was the only suggestion with merit.

Session 1: The Media Perspective

Mark Bulgutch

(Senior Executive Producer of CBC TV News Programming. Was a member of negotiation team for the last televised debate, in addition to producing them. Was also a reporter, producer, and line-up editor at local level and at The National)

- In consortium meetings leading up to debates, there is a sense that what goes on in the room is off the record; no one wants to be quoted (both network and political party people) - what this does is make the point to critics that we're too secretive.
- The paper says Canada regulates everything in the election cycle except the debate and that voter turnout has been declining—there is no evidence that regulation is of itself a good thing.
- The paper says present debates are unfair to networks who have to pay for production.
- Even private networks use public airwaves; it's not that great a burden to give up two hours of airtime.
- At least networks are subject to public pressure; why do we think a debate commission would be voter-friendly?
- In the present arrangement, the public has more power than the consortium and parties - how would they benefit from a commission?
- Excluding the Bloc from the English debate has so far been rejected by the consortium.
- In choosing how a party gets in to the debates, don't put too much faith in polls.
- To have debates among candidates for each party, not the leaders is a great idea (every week would have a new person and a new topic), but no one would notice; that would be for the already 'plugged in', won't grab the attention of the average voter.
- Regarding the suggestion of using the internet, it's a good idea, but they're already online live and 'for eternity'—what is the suggestion here? They're already blogging, tweeting, streaming videos—what more is there to do? The effort to get young people active has never really worked.
- The consortium was pretty happy with the last debate, but no one thinks the format is perfect (e.g. can't have a live audience because can't have their reactions on the air).

Anton Koschany

(Executive Producer of W-FIVE. Also runs CTV's election SWAT-team and produces the annual "A Conversation with the Prime Minister" and produced Triumph & Treachery: The Brian Mulroney Story)

- Are we talking about process and control? or about helping Canadians make informed electoral choices? Regarding the debates, we need to ask ourselves the same questions

reporters ask themselves: who are the central characters? Who cares? What is the point we're trying to get across? How do we distill the most important points to viewers and voters?

- Canadians want an upfront exchange of views in honest, informative debates between major political players that they think will have a real chance to affect their lives.
- Journalism is to be considered a public trust and networks take that seriously.
- Our current debate format came out of all-candidate meetings - we've been left stuck with the process of filming people who are talking to each other.
- There is a real danger in televising debates because at the end of day, viewers want a winner and a loser (they might not actually be 'engaged').
- Viable political alternatives should be at table, but you shouldn't be guaranteed a seat just because you were there last time.
- [In response to posing questions in English] The Bloc has little relevance outside Quebec to other voters.
- We have an election system, Elections Canada, run by bureaucrats and rules - do we want that to happen to debates? I think not.

Trina McQueen

(Broadcaster and journalist, was President and Chief Operating Officer of CTV Inc., President of the Discovery Channel, and CBC Television's Vice-President of News and Current Affairs and CBC Newsworld. She also moderated the first leaders debate of the 2006 election)

- In talking about debates, we are talking about a TV show. The goals and results might be advancing democracy and citizenship, but it is still a TV show. It is not news, nor documentary, hardly ever drama, and not really a debate—it's a highly choreographed competition where competitors vie to become the winner. More like "So You Think You Can Lead, Canada?" And must be improved by looking at its audience.
- Statistics show that for the past 15 years, debates have attracted almost the exact same size of audience.
- Not a sign of stagnation; debates are the only program on air that hasn't lost part of its audience (remarkable indication of people's interest).
- Two things are happening: i) audience, remarkably, is consistent and specialty channels are becoming much bigger players in the way Canadians watch debates; ii) the debates have a relatively high audience—public networks gain audience with debates; private networks lose a considerable audience.
- Debates change the size and composition of the TV audience—E.g. majority of viewers are typically male, older, and more educated—is there a way to make them more attractive to a wider range of people?

- One idea would be to have specialty channels show “themed” debates: e.g. history channel airing debates on citizenship in history, business networks showing financial debates, “Bravo” and like channels showing debates on the arts.
- The inclusion of more debates could solve some of the problems for networks; could provide a livelier sense of what’s going on than repetition and standard speech.
- It is a television show, and to take networks out of doing TV is to rob the debates of a source of expertise in attracting/promoting audience that we want engaged in debates.
- The idea that political parties will produce better/more tantalizing debates amazes me—political parties want a safe place for their parties.
- The idea to Regulate political speech and legislate the rules of debates should be reconsidered

Steve Paikin

(Anchor & senior editor of TVO’s “The Agenda with Steve Paikin”. Also moderated three election debates: 2006 and 2008 federal elections, and the 2007 Ontario election)

- I agree with Trina that letting politicians set the rules doesn’t make sense and that maybe the media are in an unfair position in getting to decide who participates and in covering the results. Maybe we don’t need an official commission, but could have something like the CSD decide it.
- The media consortium decides the players and also “objectively” decides the coverage.
- In the past, 1:1 debates have worked, but the problem in today’s context is that many viewers wouldn’t want to watch debates between certain people who are not the party leaders - people want to see the strong members debating.
- I like the format the way it is with leaders being seated around the table, as opposed to the stiffness of podiums.
- We are trying to democratize the whole debate process: our role is to promote good discussions and put in good follow-up where necessary, but the Canadian people are essentially asking the questions now.
- More uncomfortable questions provide for interesting and uncomfortable moments in debates - but do we want this though?

Follow-Up Comments and Questions

- Anton (follow-up to Steve): Nova Scotia had an incredible provincial debate with three leaders appearing where a journalist posed the questions and framed the debate which aired on the 6PM news. Do we need formalized debates? Maybe a formal solution isn’t the be all and end all.

- Steve: Would federal leaders go for that?
- Anton: I don't know, but we're past the points where leaders have the choice not to show up. There seems to be more political risk in not showing up. Do networks set up an empty chair to show who is missing?
- Mark: Debates attract media attention because they are not "just" the news. Would there be more audience for smaller debates?
- Anton: Perhaps smaller debates could bring more audience.
- Trina: Even if there were only half the audience, they would be well-served.
- Tom: The panellists have raised doubts about the regulation of debates and questioned the democracy behind it. Power drives are often so overwhelming that you need rules to regulate behaviour. Can we rely on public opinion to do this when some leaders want to regulate debate?
- Trina: This is a journalistic operation and we should approach this with caution. We could consider having a truly independent body assisting debates, but if networks do not have pride of ownership or production, will they promote the debate and give it a prominent spot in the schedule? Or will it open an argument between private and non-profit.
- Anton: The fear is that a regulatory body will take years to boot irrelevant parties out of the debate once they've been on. Broadcasters are airing debates because it has been defaulted to them—no one wanted to run these. Creating a body might not do anything other than have someone else run them, but not necessarily better.
- Mark: Every series of debates is a reaction to the ones before. It has been a breakthrough to get parties away from the stopwatch, ensuring they all get exactly the same amount of time. They get "rough justice" where they trust the moderators and producers to be fair, which is so much better than a stopwatch.
- Trina: Regardless of format, 3 million people keep watching. It is a game show of sorts and we must introduce elements to make it more appealing: risk, surprise, adventure, confrontation, sacrifice, etc. I think we could introduce these to debates and still have them be an illuminating exploration of politics. A more engaging format which maintains democratic seriousness is possible.

Session 2: The Political Perspective

Elizabeth May (Leader of the Green Party)

- The decision about debate participation was not made until the last minute. My only goal in going into the debate was trying to make it more interesting, content-filled, engaging and with thoughtful policy references and to have a conversation.
- Many people have decided not to vote anymore (“anti-voters”); full, free, fair debates are essential for democracy.
- Mistake in paper re: January 2007. About six months earlier people started realizing that the Greens might actually be electable and the Chair of the Consortium said that a few people from the Greens should come to see about being in the debate.
- Shortly after the meeting in January 2007, the Consortium contacted the PM’s office and was told the PM would not appear if the Greens were included.
- Conservatives & NDP both said they wouldn’t go if the Greens were allowed at the debate; we all know how it played out.
- At no time were we told if it mattered if we had a seat in the House of Commons.
- Overall, we want a consistent, transparent, predictable process - the current process is arbitrary, somewhat whimsical, and not transparent.
- Having a leaders’ debate encourages citizens to misunderstand the system; too many people think that they elect the PM directly and when our debates mimic the US style, it tends to add to that.
- I particularly like the idea that debates should include different members of political parties on different issues; it would get away from the cult of personality and the over-concentration of power in the PMO (which started with Trudeau and reached its pinnacle under Harper).
- I’m worried about excluding the Bloc—it’s not possible to say that all French-Canadians are in Quebec or that no English-speaker wants a Bloc candidate on their ballot
- I expect to be in the debate this time around

Questions from the audience for Elizabeth May

- None of us believed you when you said you did not rehearse for the debate—please expand on that.
 - Elizabeth: I did not rehearse, because watching overly groomed and trained people talking is what turns voters into anti-voters. People don’t want to feel that someone is trying to sell them something, which is why I don’t rehearse. The

term “authenticity” is thrown around a lot, but people liked me because I was the only one actually answering the questions—you can’t listen to the questions if you have over-rehearsed and are waiting for your opportunity to do your next bit

- Please expand on the issue of centralization of power in the PMO
 - Elizabeth: The increased power of political parties and concentration of power in the PMO is the reason so many people feel they aren’t involved in the process of decision-making in their own lives
 - When there is no separation of powers, taxpayer money goes toward trying to ensure PM is elected again—a seamless connection between the political party and the PMO
- Are there things that the Greens are thinking about which can engage the Canadian public more in watching the debate?
 - Elizabeth: I favour anything that makes debates more spontaneous, relevant and engaging

Katie Telford

(Extensive experience from various senior roles in Ottawa and at Queen’s Park in the areas of communications, public policy, platform development and political strategy)

- Offering the political staff perspective, most recently in Dion’s camp in the 2008 election.
- I disagree with Elizabeth regarding whether preparation and practice makes things “inauthentic.” It’s like debates in school, the people who made it to the finals were the ones who practiced. Issues like how to speak and where to look can make you look inauthentic if you don’t practice.
- I agree with Elizabeth regarding the Bloc being in one debate and not the other—if the reason you are having a French and an English debate at the national level is because of policy, then everyone should have access to both debates.
- The West cares a lot about what the Bloc has to say and wants to know their opinion.
- From the Liberal perspective, we don’t want our leader to lose. Debates are a big moment because the Prime Minister’s constructed character is not on display like normal. Liberals had a bump in nano-trackers following the debate.
- All parties have victory parties post-debate, which may work to change the media perspective as to whom “won” the debate.
- I think the report recommendations would make the French debate more about Quebec when it’s supposed to be national scope.

- Regarding the idea of bilingual debates, I looked at CBC archives from 1968, some say it didn't work but I think it did (though I have a bilingual background). Bilingual debates would allow for a more national debate and for more debates generally.
- The same level of preparation wouldn't be feasible if there were more debates.
- Having the Green Party did not provide the "oomph" the Liberals thought it would nor the tactical edge. Would we still fight for the Greens in the next election? I don't know. Should someone else make that decision?

Robin Sears

(Senior communications and public affairs advisor with Navigator, involved with campaigns and debates at both the provincial and federal levels in Canada)

- Debates are not inevitable—in both the 1976 US presidential debate and the 1980 Canadian debate it was uncertain if debates would occur.
- What are debates for and who has a role to play in them?
- They're not for the networks - journalists do have a role but the role of networks is currently too great; they are owners of a privilege and one of their obligations is to air coverage of political campaigns.
- I am entirely sympathetic to the opinion that decisions should be out of the hands of politicians and broadcast executives and go to someone else.
- Debates have a very important role, they: i) reveal character; ii) reveal capability to respond to crisis.
- Just as Question Period doesn't answer many questions, debates are not literally about the information that is being transmitted.
- A match-up of 1:1 is probably the best compromise - isolate two figures and have them do a debate, but make it fair to all players by having many debates.
- A leader's ability to handle the foreign language debate is important.
- A sufficiently savvy interviewer (like Steve Paikan) can keep the debate exciting and massage the egos of people involved and has the political knowledge to ensure correct questions are asked.
- To make a formula that works, you need to have a series of debates, e.g. six debate nights in the course of a campaign is not excessive (four in English, two in French); do them across the country with each being comprised of two 45 minute match-ups, and the last match-up should be between the PM and the official opposition.
- A logical group to run the debates are Canadian universities who should self-select to host (e.g. in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Halifax, Montreal and Quebec).
- There should also be an advisory board: 1/3 politicians, 1/3 network executives, 1/3 normal Canadians chosen by the universities.

John Mykytyshyn

(Conservative activist, pollster with Canadian Voter Contact and cofounder of The Conservative Leadership Foundation)

- One difference between reality TV and debates are that debates are scripted; most leaders are advised not to answer specific questions, but to answer with the responses prepared in advance.
- If a mistake is made, political career (nationally and provincially) can end, but if there is not some obvious mistake made, all parties will declare victory after a debate.
- Honesty isn't the main value— who won' is what matters
- What is the purpose of debates? To give a platform for any registered political party? To pick the next PM of the country and the next government? What should be the criteria?
- The leader of the opposition has a strategic advantage in debates because other opposition parties will make wilder swings at the leader.
- My four main criticisms of the paper are about regulation, and in response to the idea that the current system is unfair to networks, voters and political parties.
- Regarding concerns over regulation, democracy equals freedom and this is true for both the media and political parties - if people are free to ask questions, shouldn't political parties be able to not take part in one platform? But if an incumbent chooses not to participate, no one watches.
- Why not have a requirement to participate in some sort of democratic forum like a debate?
- For all its imperfections, the current system has people more interested in public policy than one would think
- Are the rules unfair to networks? Networks have a great privilege and I believe in public airwaves. There is another source of money though - once upon a time, corporations donated money for coverage. Now corporations can't pay anymore. I am sure there is a wealth of money that could be given for this, were it allowed.
- Are the current rules for the debate unfair to voters? We need to make debates worthwhile and interesting for people to view?
- Are the rules unfair to political parties? The number one victim to all these proposed changes will be the political parties because they'll get less of a day—I'm quite sure that more parties won't want less of a say in something as important as the debate.
- Parties try to present themselves in the best fashion possible and we can't really legislate that leaders actually answer the questions—the only thing you can legislate is who gets into the debate.

- Why 5% of seats, why not 20% and a requirement to have representatives from all regions of the country to sit at the debate?
- The best way to improve the system is not putting the bar so low as to let anyone in.
- The key principle to look at is whether debates are about entertainment or a meaningful debate between those most likely to become the PM
- The force of personality matters in debates (Mulroney: “Just watch me”)—it takes incredible responsibilities and egos to put up with what the system demands of politicians.
- If we require parties to have candidates in all parties to participate, it would be very interesting.

Follow-Up Comments and Questions

- Mark: Do you think people would honestly watch a match-up of, say, Elizabeth May and Jack Layton?
- Robin: I still think it is preferable to have a “less watchable” match-up than five people participating at once.
- Mark: Why does it matter where the debate is hosted? You’re not allowed an audience anyway (what if parties do not agree to have an audience?)
- Mark: Should it be regulated so that networks give airtime to debates organized by an outside body that parties can choose not to show up at?
- Robin: Yes. networks shouldn’t have a veto and parties should have the right not to show up. Networks are not the designers or framers of the discussion, they are the conduit.
- Trina: I am anti-regulation, likely because I work in a regulated industry and a journalistic institution. There is a difference between our political discourse and the Americans, - there are rude, feisty disagreements there and expressions of political points of view that would never be permitted on Canadian political TV and radio. Networks may not have the right to be arbiters of political discourse, but they have a right to preserve journalistic integrity.
- What worries me most about the proposals is that journalism never seems to be considered. The right to self-expression is an important part of the duty of networks and the more people who can change and regulate that point, the less free it is.
- I am intrigued by the idea of a university commission though but we must remember that networks are good at getting audiences and we might as well have them involved.

Session 3: The International Perspective

John B. Johnson

(Editor and Co-Publisher of the Watertown Daily Times since 1968, offering views on local and state debates in the US—a New York State perspective)

- The 1960 debate is the only national debate that made a contribution. After that, it changed - political handlers noticed what happened and turned to the professionals (the TV industry) and choreographed and rehearsed.
- I don't believe anyone when they say that they did not rehearse.
- US learns more from candidates exposed to journalists who are willing to tell them if they're not being candid.
- Debates need to be independently organized and removed from the government realm.
- Today's US debates are orchestrated by the two parties—no one gives lip service to the debate as a significant political discourse with influence.
- Symbolic answers are given as opportunities to change the subject.
- What is important is how people perceive the debate, rather than how it actually was - the debate creates sound bites and events are given a favourable spin afterwards.
- The most important thing anyone can do to ensure thoughtful participation is allow aggressive, day-to-day journalism to run independently and drive the election process by informing the electorate—those who survive are the ones who succeed.

Nicholas Fogg

(Mayor of Marlborough and member of Wiltshire Council and CSD fellow, discussing why the UK does not have North American-style televised debates)

- The UK seems to be the only one not to have on-air debates, yet they are the birthplace of so many ideas—why not have debates?
- The most prevalent, cynical and realistic answer is that the leader who is most likely to lose out won't participate (the party that is ahead in the polls won't want to risk squandering their lead).
- A less cynical reason is that in a parliamentary system, general elections are supposed to be about issues, not the cult of personality (and there is still the weekly confrontation in question time).
- In the UK, once a general election is called and Parliament is dissolved, all parties start off on a theoretically equal basis, with TV time roughly divided up according to how many candidates they have in ridings; a televised debate would give an unfair advantage.

- Declining voter numbers are the same in Britain and Canada (turnout has fallen to about 60%, which has paralleled with the decline in adhesion to political parties - more people are thinking outside the box).
- The populace is so disillusioned with politicians that a debate might make it worse (people are sick of confrontational showdowns and politicians of all parties are already despised).
- There is already extensive coverage of issues by the BBC in question time where some 30, 000 people apply to participate, which is very effective because the audience takes part in the discussion.
- News reports are fixated on conflict and overlook the hum drum daily tasks of politicians.
- With a general election approaching, the call for debates is growing in Britain (one news agency is trying to prompt a debate).
- I feel that once debates begin, they are unlikely to cease.
- What will the results of debates be in an increasingly cynical populace? It might increase interest/knowledge, but likely not disillusionment. It can engage the public, but on the other hand, it doesn't replace personal contact between the public and politicians, which is lacking.
- The public meeting is dead and maybe the televised debate is on the way out.

Martin Regg Cohn

(Deputy Editorial Page Editor, Toronto Star, was chief of the Middle East and Asia bureaus, arguing that the U.S. Commission is not the model to follow)

- This conference should have had some voices from Quebec present —there wasn't enough Quebec input in the paper.
- I agree that the Consortium should end, but that's not the whole answer (it's not the whole evil - just an enabler).
- I am challenging the assumptions that Canadians are bad at doing debates—look at our history of debates; there is interest from other countries (e.g. England) in the Canadian model.
- Everyone seems to like the US model, which has a grandiose, well-sounding title (“The Commission on American Debates”) as an authoritative, independent, non-partisan committee—this is a misnomer. The Commission was set up by the Republicans and the Democrats and run by their former chairs.
- The US has a bipartisan debate, argued amongst and for themselves; they only let Perot in one year because both sides thought he would be a help to them (one side was wrong).

- The League of Women Voters is the best example of a hybrid, disinterested organization to run debates, but their benchmark was 15% (they wouldn't have let the Greens in).
- We should forget about the Americans; they had an exciting election but the debates weren't all that good—they were bilateral press conferences for the most part and our roundtable format is much better.
- British PMs have been skeptical of debates (e.g. Thatcher thought they would generate “more hot air than light” and Blair said he didn't think they would generate interest)
- Why are we here today? The big scandal wasn't about debate quality, it was about participation.
- The Consortium dropped the ball when they buckled under pressure from the PM and Jack Layton - there was no reason to block the Greens because they were consistently at the 5% benchmark that the Consortium seemed to need.
- After last year's fiasco, the Consortium has lost its credibility and authority - who else should it be to replace them?
- We need a Consortium that is networked (e.g. universities or an organization like Historica), accountable and transparent. It should be called a co-operative, not a consortium.
- We have a strong tradition and history and we shouldn't sell ourselves short by embracing other countries as a model.
- Lots of other countries have more than two person debates: Sweden, Denmark, Norway, New Zealand, Germany, etc.

Follow-Up Comments and Questions

- Mark: To whom would an independent commission be accountable?
- Martin: To the public. Accountability is more theoretical in practice.
- Mark: The networks caved in at the prospect of doing a debate without Harper or Layton. One lesson to be learned is that the people really do have the power. The networks don't have to take the pressure or blink next time. Politicians must realize that they pretty much have to debate.
- Mark: Making debates mandatory doesn't make any more sense than making voting mandatory—I like the idea, but it's unenforceable.

Wrap-Up

Jonathon Rose, Professor, Queen's University Department of Political Studies

- Today we've been looking at the function of this important institution (e.g. as a platform for discussion, a place for citizen engagement).
- Discussions about structure and function are very important.
- It is important to recall that we can't change citizen behaviour by one institution alone.

Rudyard Griffiths

(Co-director of the Salon Speaker Series, co-founder of the Dominion Institute and an advisor to the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. He also writes a bi-monthly column for the National Post and authored Who We Are: A Citizen's Manifesto (Douglas & McIntyre). Rudyard serves on the boards of the Stratford Festival and the Canadian Institute for Citizenship and was recognized as one of Canada's Top 40 under 40 in 2006)

- Regarding the "anti-voter" concept, it is remarkable to see large segments of the population that are so deeply tuned out. One of the things motivating us to look at debates is a sense of an atrophying body politic when the very people who will have to shoulder the burdens— younger Canadians—are tuning out.
- The civil substantive conversation is not happening amongst our political parties
- In response to Trina's point that the media is the vehicle through which the discourse happens, we need to be respectful and conscious of the incredible journalistic expertise and experience with the parties.
- What are some of the strategies (skills, insights) we can use to being the media with us if we move from the Consortium to a new structure?
- We need to listen to the political parties and their realities and be conscious of the dynamics of politics and the risks that the leaders are taking in these debates.
- There has been a US Presidential "creep" into this discourse—almost 50% of Canadians believe the PM is elected directly
- Robin pushed us to think about the "how" rather than the "what" - how do we institute some policy of reform?
- This movement is akin to the cause of Canadian history of the 1990s; there was a feeling of potential to move that item up the public agenda, and the same can be done with debates and civil engagement.
- There has not been a warm response to the idea of a heavy legislative approach formalizing the commission within Elections Canada.

- Is there a civil society approach to building an independent commission? Universities? Think tanks? Will we do this in stages or steps?
- We need to challenge the political parties to participate in a people's debate and create a venue where the political risk for leaders to choose not to participate is increasing.
- There is a lot we can do in the shorter term to experiment with the public debates commission concept and to bring the expertise of our journalist friends.
- We should put our political leaders and parties in the box that they deserve. There is a hierarchy of the public, the party and the networks—the public must be the priority at the top and the networks are third - the party can be shifted the most

Final Comments and Questions

- Tom: should we re-examine bilingual debates (as per Katie's suggestion)?
- Trina: The bilingual debate will be seen as a Central Canada debate.
- Anton: The idea makes sense if we're trying to be all-inclusive, but it'll be bad television and hard to watch.
- Robin: remember how vapid it is without debates. I feel so strongly about organizations and structures because when you don't have debate, you dramatically enhance the power of the incumbent and tremendously disadvantage the challengers, which does not help democracy.
- Mark: The networks did believe that the PM wouldn't show up which is why we caved in. The experience is that, going forward, the leader can't opt out again. The reasonable assumption is that every challenger will be there, but you need the PM there—a debate among opposition leaders isn't enough and it won't sell.
- Anton: To the point of whether the Prime Minister comes or not, the high road is what is good for Canadians. If they choose not to come, it's showing disdain to the public discourse.

Appendix 2

From: *Éric Grenier*
Date: *Fri, 11 Sep 2009 11:19:56 -0400*
To: *Thomas Axworthy*
Subject: *Re: Debates*

Mr. Axworthy,

I appreciate your response. I've now gone through the paper, but I still have some concerns which I hope you will address.

First off, I agree that in theory it makes sense to have minimum requirements for inclusion in the debates. I also agree that they should be regulated and taken out of the hands of the media. However, while in theory your proposals make sense, they ignore our Canadian reality. The Bloc Québécois exists, and has existed now since the early 1990s. We know that the Bloc will not run outside of Quebec. So to put these requirement rules in place now would exclude the Bloc from English-language debates. Were these rules put into place before the Bloc Québécois came into existence, they would have far more merit. Instead, they appear to have the goal of excluding the Bloc, to change what has been a debate precedent since 1993.

The paper does not explain why excluding the Bloc would improve the debates. Is it to reduce the amount of people participating? True, most Canadians listening to the English-language debates cannot vote for the Bloc, but there are many English-speaking Canadians in Quebec who do have that opportunity. By putting these rules into place, the Bloc would be at a disadvantage in those anglophone ridings in Quebec.

On the other hand, having the Bloc in the English-speaking debates puts no one at a disadvantage, except perhaps that the Bloc leader takes up debate time that the other leaders could use. In that case, it would make more sense to limit the Bloc's time in the English-speaking debate to equal the proportion of Canadian anglophones who live in Quebec. That would at least give the Bloc leader time for an opening and closing statement and an opportunity to respond to questions concerning Quebec or challenges from the other party leaders concerning the Bloc.

In any case, many francophones do understand English. They will be more informed on their voting choices, which include the Bloc, by listening to the English-language debates. The English-language debates are translated into French anyway, so during the English-language debate francophone viewers in Quebec would not get to listen to the Bloc's position. It would give an opportunity for the other party leaders to attack the Bloc without the Bloc being able to defend itself. For francophones listening to the translated English-language debate, that would give the other leaders an unfair advantage over the Bloc Québécois.

Lastly, and I think this is an important point, English Canadians already have a severe lack of understanding of the Bloc. Excluding the Bloc leader from the debates, virtually the only opportunity Gilles Duceppe has to speak to English Canadians because of the lack of attention he, understandably, receives in anglophone media, would only increase this lack of understanding.

So, to sum up, making changes like this would decrease the amount of information voters have before going to the polling booths. It would unfairly disadvantage the Bloc, a party that still earns more votes than the Greens and has, as recently as 2000, received more than even the NDP. In terms of national unity, it will only increase the misperceptions English Canadians have about Quebec and the sovereignty movement, and will certainly not make Quebecers feel more included in Canadian society.

While the proposals the CSD makes are, on the whole, very good, I fail to see how this particular proposal would benefit our Canadian democracy.

Regards,

Eric Grenier

The Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD) enhances the study of democracy and governance both within Canada and abroad. Established in the mid-1990s, CSD is a non-profit, non-partisan organization affiliated with the School of Policy Studies, Queen's University. CSD works jointly with individuals or institutions abroad on research projects of mutual interest that contribute to democratic governance.

CSD is committed to engaging local partners to establish domestic capacity (a process that often takes years) and to use this expertise to jointly teach lessons that apply to other countries.

Through research, mutual learning and executive development programming, CSD increases the indigenous capacity to produce, debate, and disseminate research about democracy.

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