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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota



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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. We're going to get started very soon.

I think we have everyone present, so there's no time like right now. I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 10 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. Today is November 17. I'd like to start the meeting by providing some information following the motion that was adopted in the House on Wednesday, September 23, 2020.

The committee is now sitting in hybrid format, meaning that members can participate either in person or by video conference.

Most of this information is now for the benefit of our witnesses. Witnesses must appear, as they know, by video conference, as they're appearing today.

All members, regardless of the method of participation, will be counted for the purposes of quorum. The committee's power to sit is, however, limited by priority use of the House resources, which is determined by the whips. All questions must be decided by recorded vote unless the committee disposes of them with unanimous consent or on division. Finally, the committee may deliberate in camera provided that it takes into account the potential risks to confidentiality inherent in such deliberations with remote participants.

Today's proceedings, just like usual, are going to be made available via the website of the House of Commons. They're being webcast. The entirety of the committee will not be shown—only the member speaking. If you need to take a drink of water or have a little snack, it's okay.

For those participating virtually, you know the rules by now. Raise a point of order if you want to speak outside of your regular speaking time. You can do that by unmuting your mike and stating that you have a point of order. If somebody wants to speak to that point of order, please use the “raise hand” function in the toolbar.

If you're participating in person, the clerk will help us maintain a speaking list. We're talking to each other on the side so that we know what's happening in the room and with those participating virtually at the same time.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Madam Chair, I'm here to keep an eye on Mr. Doherty in person, so don't worry. I have him in my scope.

The Chair: All right. Mr. Doherty is becoming a good friend of mine, though, and I do trust him completely, but thank you.

It's good to know who is in the room, because it is a little difficult for me at times to get a good idea of that, but our clerk, Justin, does let me know.

Just as a reminder, if anything happens technically, please let the clerk or me know immediately so that if we have to suspend, we can suspend, so that everyone can participate fully.

That is about it. I do want to say off the top that at the last meeting Ms. Vecchio asked about the planning meeting for the prorogation study that we're going to do after this study. I have asked the clerk to try to fit in a subcommittee meeting on the 19th—that's this week—because that's the only meeting we have coming forward. That's a two-hour meeting. What we're trying to do is get another hour tacked on to that. I don't know if it will take an hour, but at least we'll have the resources for an hour. We're just finding out whether we can get that. Then we could tack it on to Thursday's meeting, and all the planning for that study could happen within that subcommittee.

The meeting on the 24th is already for two and a half hours, and then the meeting on the 26th is already a three-hour meeting. It has become very difficult to get slots outside of our regular meeting times, so that's the issue we're having right now, with a lot of the other committees also going two days a week. House resources are limited.

That's the update on that.

That being said, let's welcome our witnesses who are before us today.

We have with us Minister LeBlanc, President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs.

With him, he has Mr. Allen Sutherland, assistant secretary to the cabinet, office of the deputy secretary to cabinet, and Madam Manon Paquet.

• (1105)

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Madam Chair, I'm sorry to interrupt. We're getting a message that the audio online portion is not coming through. The dial-in portion is not coming through. It's very faint.

The Chair: Okay. We will have the tech team look into that. Thank you for raising that, Mr. Doherty. Hopefully we can resolve that because we do want our staff to be able to hear us and participate.

As I was saying, we also have the director of special projects for the democratic institutions secretariat with us here today. We are meeting on the supplementary and the main estimates today, on the Leaders' Debates Commission. I thank our minister for sending remarks in advance. I think all of you should have received those written remarks as well. They will help you follow along and formulate your questions.

Welcome, Minister LeBlanc. You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs): I've actually prepared 55 minutes of opening remarks, so I know colleagues will be quite excited to hear those, particularly my friend Todd Doherty I see there with Tom Lukiwski in the room.

Gentlemen, you have missed me so much that you're looking forward to this hour-long presentation, because I know you really want an hour-long discussion on the financial details of the Leaders' Debates Commission. I can't imagine why you would have invited me here to discuss anything else.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, don't make me bring up clam scam.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Todd, I was hoping you'd bring that up, or maybe Irving airplane transports to medical appointments would be another one we could talk about.

Colleagues and Madam Chair, I am very happy to be here. All joking aside. I am happy to see my colleagues. I've had a chance to see a number of you in Ottawa when I've been in and out over the last number of weeks, but it is a privilege to appear before your committee, PROC, Madam Chair.

I used to be a member of PROC in past Parliaments. I understand the important role of the PROC committee and the work you do, particularly around the Elections Act and democratic institutions, which are a core responsibility of your committee. It's in that context that I am obviously happy to be here today, and in particular to talk about, as I said, the financial estimates for the Leaders' Debates Commission.

As you noted, Madam Chair, I am joined by colleagues from the Privy Council Office, the assistant secretary, Allen Sutherland; and Madame Manon Paquet, who is a director in the democratic institutions group at Privy Council.

Colleagues, we have many reasons, as Canadians, to be proud of our democracy, but I think we don't need to look very far around the world to know that democracy is, in many contexts, very fragile. Protecting our values, institutions and practices is a challenge faced by all democracies and it requires constant vigilance. That's why I thank you, Madam Chair, and your colleagues on the committee for the ongoing work you do in this regard.

The Leaders' Debates Commission, and leaders' debates themselves, play an essential role in federal elections and are a corner-

stone, in our view, of a healthy, vibrant and diverse democracy. Since its creation in 2018 the independent Leaders' Debates Commission has engaged Canadians in our federal elections and provided a platform for citizens to compare and learn more about prospective prime ministers and their ideas for our country.

While the commission receives administrative support from the Privy Council Office, it conducts its mandate with complete independence from government and does so, obviously, in the public interest. That's why, on November 6 of this year, I announced that the Leaders' Debates Commission, originally established to organize debates for the 2019 general election, would remain in place for the next general election as well.

I also announced the reappointment of the Right Honourable David Johnston to the position of commissioner of the Leaders' Debates Commission. I obviously thank the Right Honourable David Johnston for agreeing to continue this important work.

As you know, colleagues, the commission was established in 2018 with a mandate to organize political debates for, as I said, the 2019 general election. The commission delivered two leaders' debates, one in each official language, during that election, but also made available the debates in a number of additional languages, including indigenous languages. But we believe, and the commissioner believes, that we can continue to do more work in that regard as well.

In the following months the commission conducted a lessons learned exercise based on its initial experience with the 2019 election. This resulted in a recommendation report, which I tabled as you know in the House of Commons on June 1, 2020. This report included 10 precise recommendations that seek to inform future debates in Canada, but I think this was another example of the outstanding work that the Right Honourable David Johnston did for Canadians.

As President of the Privy Council I have been mandated by the Prime Minister to consider the report of Canada's leaders' debates commissioner on how to further improve leaders' debates and ensure they continue to be a central part of federal general elections.

The renewal of the commission's mandate will ensure that there will be debates for the next general election, regardless obviously of the timing, which is clearly more uncertain in a minority Parliament.

The supplementary estimates (B) include an amount of \$4.6 million for the commission, which reflects the amount allocated in the 2018 federal budget. These funds are set into a frozen allotment and will only be available to the commission once the 44th general election is called.

The supplementary estimates (B) also include an amount of \$800,000, which seeks to ensure that the commission can lead the necessary preparatory work ahead of the next general election.

• (1110)

This amount represents funds that were not spent by the commission during its initial mandate and have been moved, therefore, into the current fiscal year.

[*Translation*]

Madam Chair, before concluding, I would like to thank this committee for its ongoing study regarding the conduct of a federal election during a pandemic.

As the Chief Electoral Officer notes in his special report to Parliament, it is paramount that we protect the health and safety of electors, election workers, candidates and other persons involved in the conduct of an election while continuing to maintain the integrity of the electoral process.

I look forward to reviewing the upcoming committee report. I look forward to seeing your findings and recommendations, and learning how we in government can work with your committee to determine next steps. We understand the urgency of being ready, as requested by the Chief Electoral Officer. That's why the work your committee is doing right now is so important.

In conclusion, thank you members of the committee for the opportunity to appear today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you for being here today.

Thank you to your team, Madame Paquet and Mr. Sutherland.

We had the Chief Electoral Officer in here already on that study, and we are seeing him again on Thursday this week on the estimates. We're looking forward to getting that study completed so you know what this committee is thinking when it comes to an election and how we can be ready.

We'll start the first six-minute round of questions with Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister.

It's good to see you here, Minister. It's always good to see you in the House, and in good health as well.

Minister, why is the government spending money on preparing for election debates in the middle of a pandemic?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, through you, we obviously believe that it's important for the Leaders' Debates Commission to be prepared. We know that a general election in a minority Parliament can happen at any time. We think it behooves our democracy to have that structure in place to be prepared to organize independent debates when the next general election is ultimately called.

• (1115)

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, in the last session, the Liberals pushed through the elections regulations without debate in the House of Commons. The Liberals hired a Liberal-connected polling firm to determine who participates in the debates and appointed Craig Kielburger of the WE organization as an adviser.

Since then, we've come to understand the connection of the Kielburgers to the Prime Minister and his family. Would it be safe to say that the complete independence you spoke of in your opening remarks is now in question?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, it probably won't surprise you that I don't agree with that assertion.

I think the Right Honourable David Johnston is an example of an outstanding Canadian whose integrity and independence should be well known—

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, could you then tell us what role Mr. Kielburger played in organizing last year's debates?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I wasn't a member of the debates commission, Madam Chair, so I wasn't at those meetings. The commission didn't report to me on the nature of those discussions they had as a debates commission. So no, obviously I'm not able to provide answers.

What I was going to say, Madam Chair, is that it is important to have a commission in place, led by somebody as credible as the Right Honourable David Johnston, with an advisory panel that obviously will be reconstituted now that the commission is going to be in place for the next general election. We will happily work with all parties in making suggestions for an advisory group.

Ultimately, Mr. Johnston is the appropriate person to decide who should be on this advisory group, and we trust his judgment.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Great. Those are great comments, Minister.

Now that you've said that, in keeping in line with complete independence, will you commit to appointing a panel that includes representation from each party in the House of Commons to provide input to the elections debates commission in order to prevent a debate plan that favours one party over the other?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I hadn't thought about that, but again, Madam Chair, if the commission is to do its work independently, I'd want to reflect on the appropriateness of having active partisan persons involved, in an advisory capacity, with Commissioner Johnston. We could certainly raise this with Commissioner Johnston.

In the end, he benefits from a broad range of advice from non-partisan people. There is a process, for example, where political parties interact with Elections Canada in a well-established committee or structure that Elections Canada has for hearing from representatives of political parties.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, I'll ask you to—

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I'm not sure that it behooves us to have political parties directly involved in the debates commission. I trust David Johnston. I think Canadians would as well.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, can you prepare an oral accounting of the amount that was spent last year? We're now eight months since the end of the fiscal year. Can you table that with our committee?

When your government tabled the main estimates in February, it sought a dollar for the debates commission. In June, in the supplementary estimates, nothing more was sought. Then in September you asked for \$5.4 million for the debates commission.

There has been a minority government throughout this time, so what has changed?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: If I can, I'll go back to the beginning of your question, Todd. You said to table an oral update? What does that mean?

Mr. Todd Doherty: Can you provide an oral accounting of where the money budgeted has been spent?

The Chair: I'm sorry, but I think I'm a little confused. An oral accounting...?

Mr. Todd Doherty: Can he provide us with a detailed analysis of how that money has been spent to date?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Sure, I can take a crack at that.

Todd, I will ask the assistant secretary to the cabinet, Allen Sutherland, about this. He probably has some of the detailed information you're looking for now. Obviously, if it's not adequate, we'd be happy to ensure that we provide to the committee, in writing, detailed information around that spending. Obviously we can do that, but Mr. Sutherland, I think, can offer some precision.

Mr. Sutherland will correct me if I'm wrong, but I think the reason there was a placeholder of one dollar was simply that cabinet had not, by order in council, reconstituted the commission, as cabinet did some weeks ago. Therefore, the commission, now having been formally stood up again, is in a position to have a spending authority appropriate to what was done last time. But before the government had decided to recreate the commission.... I point out that the recreated commission would reflect the suggestions Commissioner Johnston made in his report of the 2019 election. We wanted to ensure that the recreated commission would track as much as possible the thoughtful suggestions that Commissioner Johnston had made to improve it.

Perhaps Assistant Secretary Sutherland can provide some of the detailed financial answers that Mr. Doherty is looking for.

• (1120)

The Chair: Mr. Sutherland, we're out of time, but you can take 30 seconds, if you can, to answer that.

Mr. Allen Sutherland (Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Office of the Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet (Governance), Privy Council Office): Sure. I think the minister has it right. The one dollar is simply an accounting placeholder. It's fair to call it that. In the opening months of the fiscal year, the commission was not in place and was therefore not incurring any expenses.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Ms. Petitpas Taylor, you have six minutes.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Minister LeBlanc for being here with us today, as well as Mr. Sutherland and Madame Paquet. You're very generous with your time, being with

us for two hours, and we certainly appreciate the time you are giving us.

The focus of my questions is going to be the Leaders' Debates Commission.

Minister LeBlanc, I was extremely pleased when you announced this month that the Leaders' Debates Commission would remain in place for the next general election. I think we would all agree that Mr. Johnston is a stellar individual to lead this really important work.

I'm wondering if you would be able to elaborate on the intended goals of the debates commission and how you feel it contributes to our democracy.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I, too, share your view that Commissioner Johnston is exactly the appropriate person to lead this exercise. It won't surprise you or any colleagues, but I think he's probably the second-best governor general our country has had since Confederation—obviously, with my father ranking just slightly higher than him. He inspired Canadians in his work as governor general; he's an example of exactly the kind of worthy Canadian who can do a great service to Canada in that office. We see his continuing effort to voluntarily do this work. He's obviously doing this work in volunteering his time to lead this commission.

I think in previous general elections we recognized the inability that used to be referred to as a consortium debate, where different networks would get together and form a consortium, would have.... We can all remember some of the great moments: when Mr. Mulroney became prime minister, Pierre Trudeau's debates with Mr. Clark. I remember watching those as a kid. They were seminal moments in a general election campaign.

The media landscape has changed. The way Canadians consume news, the real risk of disinformation in an election context.... We thought that if we had a credible structure, like many other democracies have.... We saw in the United States that the presidential debates commission—in spite of the turbulence that that recent election saw—continued to function and to offer Americans debates with the two contenders to be president.

We think that having a structure that is independent and credible, that works obviously with party leaders—because they are the key participants in these exercises—and that can offer at least an English and French official language debate with access in a number of other languages simply helps to inform Canadians on the choices they have in a general election. It's something that Canadian voters can rely on to be fair and independent and, most importantly, accessible. If you were to do one on a specific television network that wasn't accessible in some parts of the country or in a language that wasn't accessible in other parts of the country, different private networks.... That was a challenge in previous elections. We think this is a good base to give everyone access to independent and well-structured debates.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: What do you see as the key areas that need to be improved before the next federal election?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you for the question because it tracks very much, we believe, the suggestions that Commissioner Johnston made in his report to Parliament, which, as you know, I tabled at the beginning of June. His lessons learned thought that there should be a greater role for the Leaders' Debates Commission in the production, in the format, of the debates. I think those of us who watched the 2019 debates.... There were some concerns around the format, particularly in the English debate. I think Commissioner Johnston in his report acknowledged that.

Giving the professionals at the Leaders' Debates Commission a greater say in the production issues of the debate I think may provide a higher level of rigour, obviously respecting journalistic independence. We're talking about the structure of those debates.

Another thing would be ensuring that they're available in as many languages as possible, including indigenous languages. I think there were 10 languages in the previous debates that were accessible. I think that's the number—Allen Sutherland could correct me if I'm wrong—but, again, we can do more. We can do more to ensure that indigenous or other communities in the country are able to benefit from those debates in a language that is accessible to them.

Those are just two practical things that we hope and believe the Leaders' Debates Commission will focus on for the next general election.

• (1125)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Being in a minority Parliament, do you see that we're going to have any additional challenges that the Leaders' Debates Commission is going to have to deal with?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: There are probably two areas off the top of my head.

Obviously, there is the timing. The commission was able to know that the last general election would be in October 2019. If we could get a quick consensus at the committee, perhaps, to have a report to Parliament saying that the next general election should be as planned in October 2023, that might be helpful for the commissioner's planning. In a minority Parliament, that's not a luxury that the commission will have. The timing of the election remains uncertain. I'm sure that the need to be prepared and to plan will be that much more important, as it is for Elections Canada generally.

The other unknown is what the context of the global coronavirus pandemic will be. We saw some of the discussions in the United States around having a debate where there would be plexiglass dividers between the podiums. They had two podiums in that debate. There will likely be more than two on the stage during our debates. Public health regulations and public health advice.... Assuming that election takes place where the context of COVID-19 is still a serious concern, it would behoove the commission to be very on top of public health advice to ensure that that can successfully be prosecuted as well.

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have.

Monsieur Therrien.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Good morning, Mr. LeBlanc, Mr. Sutherland and Ms. Paquet. I'm very pleased to hear from you today.

I need some help in understanding what's going on with expenditures. Mr. LeBlanc, I'm confident you're here to help us.

In the last election, it cost \$4.6 million to produce the leaders' debates.

Is that correct?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Yes, Madam Chair. According to the figures I have, that's the amount the commission needed in 2019, and that's the same amount we're proposing now.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay.

You said that funds in the amount of \$800,000 were not spent.

Is that right?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: As I understand it, the remaining \$800,000 of the 2019 allocation has been transferred to this fiscal year for the commission's preparatory work. I want to give you specific answers, and Mr. Sutherland can correct me if I'm wrong.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Right.

If I do a simple calculation, it cost \$4.6 million, plus the \$800,000 that wasn't spent, for a total of \$5.4 million.

Is that correct?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Yes, assuming that for the fiscal year of the next election, the commission will require \$4.6 million. The full amount may not have been required, as almost \$1 million remained.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay. If there was \$800,000 left over, that means the costs were less than expected.

Now, you're budgeting \$5.4 million to produce the leaders' debates. That's an increase in the cost of producing the debates. You're telling us that the \$800,000 will be used to organize the next debates, among other things. That's what I've understood.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That's it. As I said in response to a question from Ms. Petitpas, the context for the preparation of the debates will be a little different from the last time since the election date is unknown. I think that's a matter for Mr. Johnston.

Mr. Therrien, you probably know Michel Cormier, who was director general of the commission. He had a career as a journalist. He's an Acadian from New Brunswick, which warms my heart. He ended his journalism career as news director at Radio-Canada in Montreal. He worked with Commissioner Johnston, and I hope he will continue to help him in his work.

We will be able to provide you with very specific answers in writing, if that's better for you, and Mr. Sutherland will also be able to comment.

• (1130)

Mr. Alain Therrien: All right. I'm having a hard time understanding what the \$800,000 will be used for. If this amount has been carried forward, it means that the expenses were less than what was planned. Now you're presenting us with expenditures increased to \$5.4 million instead of \$4.6 million. I'm wondering what this money will be used for.

You said that there are costs associated with the fact that we would be in a pandemic situation if there was an election coming up. I have already thought that this would also increase costs. I can understand that installing Plexiglas and all the necessary equipment because of COVID may cost a few dollars more, but I don't think such a large cushion is necessary. I think the additional expense of holding debates in times of pandemic would be very small.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I fully agree with you about expenses directly related to the pandemic. I guess the amounts would be quite low.

I have never produced a national television event, and Mr. Cormier or the commissioner could provide a better explanation. Mr. Johnston's recommendation to give the commission a greater role in the production of the debates was accepted. In fact, it was recognized that the commission, which is independent, could play a greater role in the production of future debates. I guess part of the increase in costs is related to the greater role it will play in the production of the debates.

I received a lot of criticism about the production elements, especially for the English debate. I think it would be a way to promote consistency, like in the French debate, which I assessed as an observer. This reflects Mr. Johnston's desire in this regard.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay. I'd like more information about the \$800,000. I trust you, and I know you'll give it to me.

There is an amount of \$1.8 million for professional and special services. Is this a competitive bidding process? Can we find out who won the contracts? I've heard about the WE case, and I'm a little scared. It's normal, I have a strange reflex. Can we find out who got the contracts? Were they tendered? Can we have all those details?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Therrien, I'd be pleased to provide you with all these details in writing. Perhaps Mr. Sutherland can provide specifics. I've seen these details, but I don't have them in front of me.

Mr. Sutherland, can you help Mr. Therrien to understand this element?

[English]

Mr. Allen Sutherland: On the specific point about professional services, at least some of the money went towards legal services in response to the legal case against the debates commission.

[Translation]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You'll recall, Mr. Therrien, that a lawsuit has been filed against the commission. This resulted in legal costs, as Mr. Sutherland said. I'm committed to providing you with an explanation.

I would be pleased to send you and all members of the committee, through the chair, details of these expenses.

Mr. Alain Therrien: You're very kind. I appreciate it very much.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister LeBlanc.

I want to inform the committee about the phone lines. There's still some difficulty with volume on the phone lines, if you're hearing from your staff. The technical team has been working hard to try to resolve the problem. They're trying to figure out where the problem lies within the phone lines. It's been suggested that there's another way to resolve it, which I guess would involve shutting down the whole meeting for 20 minutes and doing a reboot. I don't think that's ideal. We would lose a lot of time, and nothing guarantees that it would be only 20 minutes.

In the meantime, they will continue to work on the line. If it's not possible, then they'll inform us again. Perhaps you could let your staff know that they should also tune in to ParlVU. I know there is a delay through ParlVU, but I think in the meantime it might be helpful.

We will continue with Mr. Blaikie for six minutes.

• (1135)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I want to start by thanking the minister for his comments about the importance of democracy and by acknowledging his words to the effect that we can always do more to strengthen our democracy and make it better and work better for Canadians.

Of course, I know the minister will recall that in the last Parliament we had quite an extended conversation as a Parliament about how to improve Canada's democracy by looking at the way Canadians vote. This was through the special committee on electoral reform, the structure of which was put forward by the NDP in Parliament. We were very happy to see it proceed, although we weren't very happy about the outcome in the sense that we really did feel that the committee had managed, despite many challenges, to put a path forward. We shared the disappointment of many Canadians when the government chose not to move forward on that. We did note with interest, however, that the Liberals on the committee had filed a report saying that we should have more consultation with Canadians on how we vote and how we can improve our democracy in that way.

Many people in civil society, including Fair Vote, a well-established organization that advocates for voting reform, have proposed that we have a citizens' assembly at the federal level. Given that partisans within Parliament weren't able to agree on a system, perhaps we could break the logjam by leaving it to Canadian citizens to get together, get the best information on the various voting systems, and then make a concrete proposal on how Canada moves ahead.

It's in that spirit that our leader, Jagmeet Singh, sent a letter to the Prime Minister on November 4 asking for his support for the initiative of establishing just such a citizens' assembly. In that spirit, I want to give notice of the following motion at the procedure and House affairs committee today:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(a)(vi), the committee undertake a study on the advisability of establishing a National Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform to make recommendations about how to improve Canada's electoral system, including the question of how Canadians elect Members of Parliament and how the make up of Parliament reflects the votes cast by Canadians; that the committee's study shall include an examination of: (a) the terms of reference for such an assembly; (b) the composition of such an assembly; (c) a timeline for the completion of such an assembly's work; (d) public reporting requirements for such an assembly; (e) the resources required to support the work of such an assembly, including measures to ensure comprehensive and effective citizen engagement throughout the process; (f) any other matters the committee deems pertinent to voting reform; that the committee report back to the House no later than May 3, 2021, and; that the committee's report either (I) recommend not to proceed with such an assembly or (II) recommend to proceed with such an assembly and include a detailed plan for how to proceed that provides for the issues raised in items (a)-(f).

I wanted to give that notice while you were here, Minister, in order to be able to benefit from your thoughts on how we might move forward with such an assembly or how we might make good on the Liberal Party's own suggestion from the last Parliament that we continue to consult Canadians about the way we vote. If not a citizens' assembly, then what would that be? I note there are no resources set aside here in the estimates for that kind of consultation. When might we hope also to see some financial resources dedicated to that consultation?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: On a point of order, Mr. Blaikie admitted in his remarks there is no money in these particular estimates for this, so I would respectfully suggest this is outside the scope of what we're discussing today.

I'm sure the minister is very capable of answering this question, and he's probably chomping on the bit to get into it.

I think that it's important that we stick to the issue today: the main estimates and questions related to those. Mr. Blaikie said himself that there is no money for this in the main estimates, so the fact that he brought this up seems to me to be out of order, but I'll let you decide.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: On that same point of order, Madam Chair, if I may just respond to the Liberals—

The Chair: Yes. I paused your time, Mr. Blaikie, a little while back. I was going to tell you that I was going to give you time to put this motion on notice at the end of the meeting. Maybe I should have stated that at the beginning, but I wanted to see how the meeting went and how much time we would have.

It isn't within the scope of the estimates right now, but it is a fair point. I sat on the electoral reform committee, which travelled the country studying this important issue, with your colleague Mr. Cullen. We had a very good time hearing from Canadians about this very issue.

As to whether it's relevant, you can make the statement that you wish, Mr. Blaikie, and perhaps we could see if Minister LeBlanc would be willing to share any of his ideas on the issue.

• (1140)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

It's important to note that experienced parliamentarians, including the minister, will know that decisions and conversations about the estimates are as much about what is not in them as they are about what is in them.

I have participated in many question-and-answer sessions with ministers about their estimates where we discussed decisions not to fund certain priorities, so I think it is legitimate to ask why there aren't resources for continuing to consult or for starting a meaningful consultation with Canadians about what our voting system is.

When we talk about responsible government, and governments having answers for their spending decisions, they have to answer just as much for what they aren't spending on as for what they are spending on.

I would say to Mr. Gerretsen that he might feel more passionate for my side of the issue were he on the opposition benches questioning a Conservative government. Here in Manitoba, we have a Conservative government that is not spending the money that it should on the pandemic. I'm sure Mr. Gerretsen is not implying that members of the Manitoba government shouldn't be able to challenge the government about pandemic spending that it is not doing simply because the government hasn't made a proposal to spend money that it's not going to spend.

We have to be able to talk about spending in general. Particularly as we are also discussing the main estimates, not just the supplementary estimates, it's a fair point to ask why funding for this initiative isn't there. That is my defence for why I think this is quite relevant.

I'll just end by saying I very much look forward to the minister's answer.

The Chair: Minister, would you like to share your comments and feedback on that issue?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Of course, Madam Chair.

Thank you for the opportunity and thank you, Mr. Blaikie, for raising obviously a critical issue: the idea of consulting Canadians on ways to improve our democracy and ways to improve the participation of Canadians. It's something we should be constantly focused on.

I can imagine the context of COVID presents, in and of itself, something that we need to be very aware of.

I don't propose, Madam Chair, to have a view on the agenda of your committee and how you choose to organize your meetings. Your committee properly has the mandate to look at issues around elections, the Canada Elections Act and voting, and I would certainly see that as a very appropriate forum to begin this conversation should your committee take up Mr. Blaikie's motion.

Obviously, as the minister responsible for Elections Canada, but with the help of Privy Council officials, I would be happy to provide any information we might have that would be useful should your committee decide to take up that issue. In terms of what might be in future spending estimates, we'll let the Minister of Finance and the President of the Treasury Board work on those.

I want to conclude, Madam Chair, by saluting Mr. Blaikie's service in Parliament. Daniel, I was a fan of your father's service as a long-standing member of Parliament. There is a small group of us: you would be in the group, and I might be. The Prime Minister himself is. Geoff Regan is. We are lucky enough to serve in an institution where our parents served. I remember fondly your father's service, and it is particularly a pleasure for me to see you at the committee this morning. I haven't had a chance to see you in the House of Commons, because we don't tend to cross over the aisle and talk to colleagues in a cheerful way as we might do if we sat near one another at a desk, but it is a privilege for me to see you here this morning and also to see you serving in the House of Commons.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much. I look forward to continuing to work with you and hopefully working towards establishing a citizens' assembly at the federal level for voting reform.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I would just point out that I neglected to mention that the Acadian people in New Brunswick have a number of institutions that have grown over the decades going back hundreds of years that all properly started with citizens' assemblies. That's how we adopted the Acadian flag. That's how the Société Nationale de l'Acadie was born. There are great examples where the Acadian populations from Atlantic provinces and Quebec have used citizens' assemblies to push forward not only our rights, but issues important to Acadians. I'm particularly sensitive to that forum.

Thank you, Mr. Blaikie.

• (1145)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

The Chair: Next, for five minutes, we have Mr. Tochor.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Thank you very much, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

We're talking about fathers and their different roles. My father was a plumber. I'll actually ask my questions the way he would ask about this spend.

If you're looking at spending additional dollars or repeating additional investments on a worthwhile and, I think, well-intended project, you'd ask what was spent before.

Mr. Sutherland, how many taxpayers' dollars were spent on the debates in 2015?

Mr. Allen Sutherland: At the time those debates were held privately, so zero public dollars were spent.

Mr. Corey Tochor: We had zero taxpayer dollars spent in 2015. In 2019 we had \$4.6 million of taxpayers' dollars spent on something that the private sector was delivering.

Mr. LeBlanc, what would you say to the taxpayer in your riding who had to earn that dollar and pay half of that or upwards of half

of that to the government to spend on this during a pandemic? Would they say that's money well spent?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I believe they would because I believe that Canadians know that there's a—

The Chair: If you could just pause for a minute. Your sound is not very good.

I've paused your time, Mr. Tochor, but I'd like for you to be able to get the response.

We can hear you now. Please continue.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: As I was saying, my belief is that Canadians know that there's a cost to having a free, open and fair democracy, and to have elections conducted with the highest level of integrity in the fairest and most accessible way possible.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Was 2015 not a fair election?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I certainly liked the result of the 2015 election. I don't have to hide from you that I thought the result of that election was outstanding, but I did have a high level of discomfort as that election went on.

Mr. Harper originally called a 79-day election. I remember because it started in August and finished after Thanksgiving in October. Mr. Harper announced that he was not going to participate in what had been known as the consortium debate. Instead, Mr. Harper sort of cherry-picked a series of venues and debates that had limited access—whether it was a university campus or a network that perhaps was not accessible across the country or not accessible in both official languages—and there ended up being a hodgepodge of debates.

Clearly, I think the Prime Minister excelled in those debates. I was obviously proud of the way our leader did in those debates. The results speak for themselves, but there was a certain incoherence when the election began because Mr. Harper started by vandalizing what had been a long-standing tradition of these consortium-led debates.

The debates commission was our way to try to restore at least a basic platform that is fair and accessible across the country in both official languages in a reliable way. Leaders, of course, are free to pick and choose other debates they may wish to attend.

Mr. Corey Tochor: This is my time, Minister.

Let's go back to the cost. You're of the belief that \$4.6 million of taxpayers' money is better spent on holding a debate that could be held privately rather than on health care during a pandemic. I just want to be clear on that.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: No, of course not. You're—

Mr. Corey Tochor: Why are we spending \$4.6 million on this?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I think you should acknowledge that our government is spending a great deal on health preparedness in the—

• (1150)

Mr. Corey Tochor: Too much.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Do you think we're spending too much on preparedness for the pandemic?

Mr. Corey Tochor: No. I believe you're spending a lot of money. The \$4.6 million could be spent better than producing a flashy debate where questionable results, I think, on the production value.... If you look back to the English debate and how many moderators we had on stage, you see it was a somewhat questionable outcome.

Along those lines—and I realize I'm running out of time here—I go to Mr. Sutherland—

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Make sure you leave me enough time to answer your questions, of course.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Did the WE Charity receive any dollars in the 2019 commission?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Again, I just want it to be very clear because a false connection was attempted to be made there. Whatever spending is appropriate to have a fair and independent credible debates commission in an election will in no way limit the government's very important responsibility to spend what is necessary for the health and safety of Canadians in a pandemic.

That is a false choice to pretend that, because we've decided to set up an independent, fair and robust debates commission, somehow it's going to take away from other investments necessary for the provinces and territories—

Mr. Corey Tochor: But it wasn't independent. I'll go back to the question to Mr. Sutherland—

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

The Chair: Perhaps I could just pause everybody for a moment. We still have issues with sound.

Your sound, Minister LeBlanc, is going in and out. It comes right back, but it fades as well when you're speaking.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: On a point of order, Madam Chair. I think the issue is not with the minister's mike. Given the fact that it's being repeated with different speakers, I have a feeling it is the system itself where audio keeps fading and coming back. The same thing happened to Mr. Blaikie.

The Chair: Yes, that's right. I was going to say that it didn't happen to anybody else, though.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Let's try Mr. Sutherland to answer the question. Then we'll hopefully get the tech people, in the meantime, fixing it.

Mr. Sutherland, did the WE Charity receive any dollars from the 2019 debates commission?

The Chair: You have 10 to 20 seconds.

Mr. Allen Sutherland: In the 2019 debates commission, Mr. Kielburger was a member of the advisory committee.

Mr. Corey Tochor: The charity itself did not receive any dollars.

Mr. Allen Sutherland: Not to my knowledge....

Mr. Corey Tochor: Could you table the charities that did receive dollars?

What was the amount that Marc Kielburger was paid per diem?

Mr. Allen Sutherland: I don't know that offhand, but I could find out.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Could you table that, please?

The Chair: That's all the time we have.

I have paused at times, as well, to allow you more than the six minutes because of the points of order and the interruptions.

Next we have Mr. Turnbull for five minutes, please.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister and your colleagues, for being here, which I'm finding very helpful.

I just wanted to follow up on the main estimates. Basically what you've told us, I think, just to clarify, is that the budgeted amount for the previous leaders' debate function was actually not spent. This means that we've been able to carry over unspent funds to cover the sufficient permanent infrastructure to help us prepare in a minority situation. Is that correct?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Yes, that's my understanding.

I understand there was \$800,000 unspent, which is what we're proposing as the amount to give the commission in some preparatory capacity in advance of the election. Is that correct, AI?

Mr. Allen Sutherland: Yes. The money that had been allocated for last year is being used for current operations. Then, as you said in your opening remarks, the \$4.6 million is the frozen allotment for the year of the debate.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: We haven't actually increased the amount. We've accounted for the carry-over, and we've allowed that to actually help fulfill one of the debate commissioner's recommendations, which I believe is recommendation 9, which is to have sufficient capacity in a minority situation to be able to prepare for a leaders' debate at any time. Is that right?

Mr. Allen Sutherland: I think that's a fair assessment. Part of what the commission will be doing now is making preparations so that it's ready, should an election be called, with national debates. There are other parts of it. You could look at recommendation 10, where they look at research capacity to ensure the best practices are put in place for the next debate. You could argue that the money being spent now could be applied to that as well.

• (1155)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay. That's wonderful. It sounds very prudent, if you ask me.

Just moving on to another topic that is important to me, I know that in the last election quite a number of concerns were expressed about the disinformation and specifically that on social media. I think those concerns are particularly relevant, especially given the COVID-19 context, where people might be isolated. If a snap election is called, certainly people will be using online sources to influence and inform their decisions on who to place their confidence in. I think this elevates it to a level of importance that, in a COVID context, is pretty significant.

Minister, could you outline how you intend to increase citizen resilience and combat social media disinformation, which we know is all too prevalent today?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Ryan, you're absolutely right.

Our colleague Karina Gould, when she was the minister responsible for democratic institutions, in advance of the 2019 election I think took some very significant steps, supported by the officials at the Privy Council, some of whom are here with me today, to help build citizen resilience, as you said, in the best way.

This is a global challenge. There is a huge threat to basic information caused by misinformation, but more particularly by disinformation. As colleagues will know, that's the deliberate dissemination of information designed to divide societies, designed to provoke reactions. Some of it, of course, reaches the level of hate speech as well.

It can be very corrosive to a functioning democracy. It's something that probably wasn't imagined 20, 30 or 40 years ago, but in every general election—and you can imagine it in global contexts—we have more and more worrying examples around the world, where democracies need to insulate themselves and protect themselves. The best way to do it is to build an ecosystem of citizen resilience, where citizens are able to distinguish misinformation from reliable information.

The social media platforms also have an important role to play. I think it's no secret that my colleague, the heritage minister, has talked about upcoming changes as well. We think there's a responsibility and, to be fair, a number of the social media platforms, in advance of the 2019 election, the last election—such as advertising registries, for example—increased their transparency in an effort to ensure that they would not become a source of irresponsible dissemination of information that has as its very objective to undermine and damage democracies.

Ryan, as you well know, Heritage Canada runs something called the “digital citizen initiative”, which supports social cohesion and democratic citizens groups to build greater resilience.

Madam Chair, I would just finish with this. If you and your colleagues on the committee have suggestions, have ideas, of how we can go further to build greater citizen resilience and to fight disinformation, perhaps we could look at the experience in the United States of the presidential election that just concluded there. I know that the U.K. election had some interesting circumstances as well.

If your committee would like a briefing from officials, including security and intelligence officials who follow these items for the Government of Canada, I would be more than happy to arrange

those briefings, and I look forward to working with you on those issues and so many more.

The Chair: Thank you.

Actually, Minister LeBlanc, it's something that I am extremely interested in. I did attend your virtual talk a little while back on this issue. I definitely tuned in for that, because I think it's a big issue that democracies around the world are facing.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, as I say, I'm lucky enough to be briefed by some of the security and intelligence officials on these issues around disinformation and even foreign interference. Heretofore, Canada has been lucky—not immune, but lucky—in terms of damage to our democracy, but we need to remain vigilant. If in some future meeting you and your colleagues decide that you want a briefing on this, I would be happy to arrange whatever is appropriate that the committee would like to hear.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that offer.

Mr. Therrien, you have two and half minutes.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Mr. Tochor kind of stole my question, and I didn't really understand the answers, so I'm going to come back to it.

In short, in 2015, the private sector was organizing the debates. There was no cost to the public treasury. Then it was decided that there should be a commission for the leaders' debates. This resulted in expenditures of \$4.6 million.

Why was this commission created? Why was the idea that the government should spend money to do what the private sector used to do? Was there a problem?

Honestly, I don't understand. You may have explained it earlier, but I didn't understand.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I'll be pleased to explain the situation to you.

I'm not an expert on the subject, Mr. Therrien, but I've been interested in elections for a long time, as probably many of us have been. There are always moments you remember, for example, Mr. Mulroney in 1984. There are dramatic moments in these leaders' debates, there have been dramatic moments in previous elections, and that goes back a very long time.

I remember Mr. Bouchard's debates very well, and I always found it interesting to see that the day after the debates in English, for example, it was often Mr. Duceppe who was perceived as having won the debate in English. So, you can imagine that this made us smile a little bit.

The debates in English and in French were coordinated by a consortium of networks and accessible to everyone. I don't remember all the networks that organized them, whether it was CBC or CTV in English, but I felt that Radio-Canada and CBC in English had a key role with other partner networks. However, the signal was available on all the networks. So if people in your riding wanted to follow the debate in English or in French, they had very broad, if not complete, access to cable companies or other ways of getting their television signal. Now you can see it on the Internet. It's different.

In 2015, Mr. Harper began his election campaign by saying that he would not participate in the debates organized by the consortium, the device that has always been used. Mr. Harper chose certain debates, certain regional networks, certain university campuses. I don't understand the Conservatives' political strategy, but he wanted to decide or have the power to decide. If the Prime Minister of Canada doesn't participate in debates, the situation is different from when all the leaders of the major political parties are there. This is why we believed that we needed to bring at least a minimum platform of coherence, which does not take anything away from the leaders' choices.

In 2019, I was in the Maisonneuve-Rosemont hospital in Montreal. I watched the debate from my hospital bed, on TVA. Leaders may decide to go to other networks in other circumstances. However, with a commission that has the mandate to produce, in partnership with the networks, a debate that will be accessible to everyone, to all the networks, we don't find ourselves in situations where some regions can't watch it in the language of their choice. I'm not sure that all New Brunswickers had access to TVA, for example, to see the same debate I saw in Montreal during the last campaign. There, at least, we have a certain basic platform. The commission can offer that.

I think we should look at what happened in 2015. From memory, I know that there was some concern at the beginning of the campaign.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay.

I read—

[*English*]

The Chair: Unfortunately, that's all the time we have.

Mr. Blaikie, please go ahead.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I have what amounts to an accounting question, although I think it's an interesting one.

I note that \$5.4 million is requested under the heading of the Leaders' Debates Commission, and an additional \$800,000 for what you have indicated as preparatory work. That is under vote 5 of the Treasury Board submission in the supplementary estimates.

Why was the additional \$800,000 not included in the request for the leaders' debate, and what difference does it make to have it in vote 5 as opposed to the Leaders' Debate Commission?

• (1205)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That's a technical question, and I'll let Al Sutherland answer it.

Again, for any of these technical questions, Madam Chair, we'd be happy to provide, through you to the committee, any specific answers in writing that aren't sufficient for any of these questions on spending.

Mr. Allen Sutherland: The \$800,000 is for current operations. What's different about the \$4.6 million is that it's in the frozen allotment, which means it is held back by Treasury Board until such time as it's needed for the actual conduct of the debates. That's the difference between the two sources of funds.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: The money that's being requested under vote 5 under Treasury Board would flow now and the money that's being requested under the Leaders' Debates Commission would be held over.

Mr. Allen Sutherland: Yes.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I am interested to know what the allocation of \$800,000 for preparatory work.... I know it's been suggested by some that the Leaders' Debates Commission have a permanent infrastructure and continue to exist between elections. I'm wondering, Mr. Minister, if with this \$800,000 the government is moving down the road towards that, if it has an opinion on that recommendation. If that's not what this is, how would you characterize it, if not in that way?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I know that Mr. Johnston, in his report, talked about creating a permanent ongoing structure. In my conversations with him, he generously indicated that he was not seeking to be that permanent ongoing commissioner but would help the country again in the next general election, if asked.

I'm offering you my own personal view. The cabinet hasn't made a decision on this. It would require legislative change. Again, these would properly be matters that your committee should look at, I would suggest, or reflect on and make recommendations to the government on in terms of changes to the Canada Elections Act. Personally, I would favour an ongoing permanent structure in legislation, which would provide that basic platform in general elections of an accessible, open and fair debate between leaders with a properly independent commission to make those decisions, obviously.

We would welcome that future conversation. Again, your committee's advice would be very helpful.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. LeBlanc, for being here. It is always wonderful to see you in the House of Commons.

I have a simple question to start. You've referred a lot back to 2015 versus 2019. Is it mandatory for leadership candidates to participate in this new format?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That's a very good question, Ms. Vecchio. I hadn't thought of it that way.

I don't think we can, by an order in council, force some leader to show up on a stage at a certain time with a dark suit on and some makeup. I don't think that is.... It's a very good question.

But no, I think a leader would be perfectly able to decline to participate and to explain to his or her supporters—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Excellent. That's good to know, because we're talking about....

You very well said why, in 2015, you felt it was appropriate, but in 2019 we actually had six candidates take the floor, which we know was extremely busy. With five moderators, it even got a little crazier than that.

We're talking about the fact that we've gone from spending zero dollars—Paul Wells has said that with \$6 million, Maclean's could have 60 debates.

It's coming out that a debate costs approximately \$250 million to run. Why would the government have to run a debate if it weren't mandatory in the first place? You've said a number of times that was because that's what Harper did. Well, they're not mandatory and that doesn't matter. It's 2020 now. Why does the government still need to run these debates, then? If they're not mandatory, why does it need to be the government versus a private consortium?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Again, I don't want to be too technical. It's not the government that's running the debates. It would be an independent commission, obviously financed through the normal estimates process. That's what we're talking about today.

I'm a big fan of Paul Wells and Maclean's magazine. If he would like to organize 60 debates.... The problem is that the Maclean's magazine's debates wouldn't necessarily be in French, would they? That is one of the challenges.

My constituents are two-thirds francophone. They consume a significant portion of their information from French media platforms. Our view is that this offers a basic guarantee of structured, fair and accessible debate. Different networks can carry the signal for free.

But again, if Paul Wells wants to organize 59 more, we'll see if the leaders want to show up 59 times at his debates.

• (1210)

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Oh, that's very fair.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Maybe in a pandemic election when people won't be able to travel as much—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: They'll have nothing else to do.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: How could you come to the Atlantic bubble? This is the challenge.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Very true.

Thanks very much, Dominic. I really appreciate it.

I want to note something else. We heard about the chaos. I watched the debates. I'm just like you, Dominic. I've watched those debates. When we talk about Trudeau and Clark, I've watched those too. To me, it is really important to have those. They need to be non-chaotic. They need to be transparent. They need to be all of these things.

How are we going to move forward though? This commission is not a government agency but it is still not fully independent from the government because it is for the government of the day.

As I look at this, the government of the day chose the last time to put an order in council. I'm wondering if you will commit to not putting an order in council when it comes to who's allowed to participate in the 2020 or the 2021 leadership. Would the order in council be there, or the participation criteria? I'm just trying to find out where you are with those things.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That's a very fair question. The Right Honourable David Johnston was precisely the kind of person—and in this case, the precise person—to provide that confidence to Canadians that it was, indeed, independent from the government. Mr. Johnston would not accept to do this if the government or any other partisan actor were offering him direction in terms of how he should organize these debates. We had full confidence, as I think Canadians did, in his judgment. There were lessons learned, you're right, Karen, from the 2015 experience.

I would trust Mr. Johnston's judgment, and that was part of his lessons learned document that was made public in June, in terms of giving him the authority to determine who participates on the stage. It shouldn't properly be the subject of court litigation either, to your colleague's question, as that can use up a bit of money as well.

We would allow Mr. Johnston and the commission to make those decisions, but we think that basic platform should exist. As you say, the order in council is perhaps not the ideal mechanism.

To Mr. Blaikie's question, if we could get consensus in the House of Commons to pass very quickly—our House leaders might even agree to help us with this—legislation that would permanently create a debates commission, I would be the first one to be enthusiastic about that, but that consensus isn't there yet. That's why the order in council is the mechanism that sets this up. In our view, it is not the long-term solution, but it will be in place for the next election.

The Chair: Ms. Duncan, you are next.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister.

Mr. Sutherland, our officials and Ms. Paquet, thank you for joining us this morning to talk about protecting our democracy.

Since the minister has mentioned how to protect electors, election workers, candidates and all Canadians should there be an election, I am going to ask a few questions.

We have had a discussion about the regional nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasing number of cases, and how to protect the health and safety of all involved: for example, having infection prevention and control experts; guidance to political parties; a review of party pandemic plans; cleaning, masking and social distancing at polling stations; infection audits during the election; a greater number of polling stations; more hours at polling stations; and a mock-up of polling stations before their implementation. These are just a few of the ideas.

I'd like to ask Minister LeBlanc, does he have any ideas he would like to share now about protecting the health and safety of Canadians should there be an election during the pandemic?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Ruby, when people were talking, I was stuffing part of a grilled cheese sandwich into my mouth when Kirsty was asking the question. Was that visible on the screen?

• (12:15)

Mr. Todd Doherty: Yes.

The Chair: No, but you have put it on the record now.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I don't look like somebody who has missed too many meals and that won't be a surprise. It's an hour later here in New Brunswick. I want to make sure I'm in great shape for question period. Kirsty, this didn't take away from your time.

Kirsty, as I mentioned in my opening comments to your chair, I am extremely interested in the work your committee is doing in looking at the Chief Electoral Officer's report about the context of a pandemic election. I like the idea very much of trying to find the appropriate legislative measures we can put in place with broad consensus in the House of Commons. Obviously, that would quickly give the Chief Electoral Officer the ability for the next general election.... I like his idea of sunsetted provisions that it would apply to the next election, which we fear may obviously be in the context of the ongoing pandemic.

Kirsty, your own professional experience around these issues: infection control measures, dealing with pandemics and viral transmissions probably makes your own thoughts much more valid than mine on this issue. I can tell you that in my conversation with the Chief Electoral Officer, probably already three months ago, one of his concerns was can the government help procure for Elections Canada all the personal protective equipment and extras they would need to ensure the safety of those people working in an election during a pandemic. Our answer obviously was yes. Any time Elections Canada has come to Privy Council, Allen Sutherland or others, with requests in getting ready themselves, based on the best public health advice they are getting from public health authorities, we obviously want to collaborate immediately. That was a commitment I made to Mr. Perrault and obviously that's an ongoing commitment.

Kirsty, you're right. For example, we finished an election in my province of New Brunswick, a provincial election during the beginning of the second wave, which we see tragically under way now, and I noted that the chief public health officer, Dr. Russell from my province, when she testified before your committee indicated that the provincial election in New Brunswick didn't have any direct incidents of COVID transmission, at least to the best of their information.

It's easy because for the moment the circumstances around communal spread in New Brunswick may be different from other parts of the country, although I don't pretend to think we're immune in any way from some of those challenges. I had a conversation with Premier Horgan after he was re-elected in British Columbia and he talked to me about some of the things their elections agency did with Dr. Henry and other local and regional public health officials, not simply the provincial public health officers. I think there is a body of best practices. Saskatchewan of course.... We have a body of best practices already and probably the committee can request this, but if you want, I can ask PCO if we can access those reports and make them available to your committee. I'm sure Elections Canada would share with you all of that as well. I would be happy to work on your suggestions.

Thanks, Madam Chair. I'm sorry I'm talking too long.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We're going into our third round. We have you for a little while longer.

Mr. Lukiwski, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you very much.

Minister, it's good to see you.

I do have a few questions. Much of the ground has been covered by my colleagues. But my first question, and I would suggest the most important question, Minister, is how is your health?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Tom, you're very generous. Thank you for asking. You and I have had a chance to serve together and become friends over many years so your question means a great deal to me.

The good news, Tom, is I think I'm one of the lucky Canadians. Over 15 months ago now, I had a stem cell transplant from an unrelated donor in Europe, imagine. My sister was not a match. The hospital in Montreal—they don't do these procedures in New Brunswick—found an unrelated donor who was a perfect genetic match with the same blood type as me and that wonderful gentleman gave me a completely new blood and immune system, which is functioning perfectly normally 15 months out.

I feel very lucky and the medical tests I keep going through are very encouraging so thank you for asking, Tom. Colleagues, when you are away from these jobs we have and from colleagues and friends whom we take for granted—I was away when I was sick—you have no idea how happy you are to see the familiar and friendly faces of people you like and worked with in the past. Tom, you're in that category for me. Thank you for that nice question.

• (1220)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: You're very welcome. Just take care of yourself, Minister. We want to see you around for many more years.

Now I'll stop being Mr. Nice Guy and we'll get down to business.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You're always Mr. Nice Guy, Tom. That's one of the problems. Even when you pretend not to be, we know you are.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I'm just a big softie, like you, Minister.

I want to go back to the debates commission set-up for a moment. You have stated publicly, as has the Prime Minister in recent months, that you didn't want to see, and you still don't want to see, a snap election called. The NDP has indicated that they certainly don't want to see another early election called. Recent polling has indicated that most Canadians don't want to see an early election.

This is your opportunity, Minister, to put it on the record. Unless the government falls due to lack of confidence, are you committing today, because you referenced it earlier, that your government would not be going back to the polls early, that it would wait until October 21, 2023?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Tom, you've been around a long time. I recognize the trap that is that question. I had the privilege of being in Parliament for two parliaments where Mr. Harper led a minority government. It is a well-known constitutional convention in Westminster parliaments that the Prime Minister can determine what he or she considers to be the confidence of Parliament. Mr. Harper did it a number of times.

I remember those votes, Tom, as would you. I can say—

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Minister, look, I did not try to trap you. I just wanted to see if you wanted to put on the record some sort of an official comment on the government's intentions.

Let me move on to another question—

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Sure; then give me a chance to do that, Tom. I will put it on the record very clearly that the government has no intention to call a snap election. During the pandemic, our priority is to work with all parliamentarians, as we have since the beginning.

Tom, if somebody had said to you and me two years ago that we would be passing unbelievably important financial legislation with often unanimous consent in the House of Commons, we wouldn't have believed it. I think it says something great about our Parliament. We want that to continue, with people working collaboratively together as much as possible.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you for that.

My last question goes back to the process of the debates commission itself. I agree wholeheartedly with your assessment that Mr. Johnston is an eminent Canadian. I believe he is completely independent and non-partisan. I look forward to him coming forward, hopefully in the near future, with a detailed proposal of what he would like to see in the set-up, perhaps the production side of things, for the next debate.

However, and I think you would recognize this as well as I do, political parties have a say, or at least I believe should have a say, in the set-up of the debates. Every single political party for the last two centuries has had debates, whether it be individual members of Parliament or leaders. I think it would be beneficial, frankly, to the commission if all of the registered political parties in Parliament would have an opportunity to at least give some suggestions to the commission on what they would like to see in terms of the set-up and production of a leaders' debate.

Would you support that assessment, that you would encourage and allow political parties, who would have their own checks and balances, an opportunity to make some assessment and make some recommendations to the commission itself?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I don't disagree with the premise at all of what you're saying. I would have phrased it differently; I don't think it's that the government shouldn't "allow", or I shouldn't "allow" Mr. Johnston or the commission to have what structures he thinks are appropriate. Your suggestion of the commissioner, of Mr. Johnston and his staff, having a structure where political parties can properly offer advice and input into the debates process is obviously something that makes eminent sense. That structure existed with previous consortia that were organizing debates in past elections.

Maybe Allen Sutherland can add to this. To be honest, I don't know if that structure existed, because during the 2019 election I was kind of out of commission for a good chunk of it; I was sick. I think Mr. Johnston would normally have an advisory group that would provide him that kind of input from recognized parties. I would certainly support that. I can't imagine the Liberal Party not participating if Mr. Johnston set up something with the recognized parties. If your committee suggested to him....

I just want to be careful that it's not a suggestion from the government. If your committee were to suggest that to him, if you're asking if the Liberals would participate, I cannot imagine we wouldn't. I personally think it's a good suggestion.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

A yes or no from Mr. Sutherland...?

Mr. Allen Sutherland: Just to clarify, my understanding is that informally he did reach out to each of the parties. It would be best answered by the debates commission.

The Chair: Yes. In the past, Mr. David Johnston has been before this committee, in the previous Parliament. To my recollection, there were discussions with all of the parties as to the production of the debate and the rules that were going to be followed.

I'm sure we can have Mr. Johnston here at some point as well in the future.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I think it's a good suggestion that Mr. Lukiwski made. If your committee were to formally suggest it to Mr. Johnston, that perhaps is a better way than having a political party itself suggest it. If you wanted to formalize some structure, I can't imagine that the Liberals wouldn't participate with other parties in it.

The Chair: Absolutely. I think our committee is best suited to do that. Thank you.

Mr. Gerretsen, take five minutes, please.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you, Minister LeBlanc, for taking the time today. I note that you are giving us a full two hours. I don't think I've been on a committee to which a minister has given a full two hours. If I didn't know any better, I would think you enjoyed this.

I must admit, I'm concerned about some of the comments that have been made. I think it's extremely important for a debates commission such as this to be completely independent so that we can reduce the level of partisan attacks as much as possible. I'm really concerned when I hear questions about whether the WE Charity received money from the commission. Likewise, in the States I know that the Republican candidate was extremely critical of their debates commission.

How do we set up a system, or where is the commission's accountability placed, such that we can reduce the amount of partisanship as much as possible, so that it can have its own independence and autonomy, especially in the context of what you described in your opening remarks as the misinformation and the concerns that exist in this day and age? Having this independence, completely autonomous and completely separate from partisan interests, government interests or individual political parties.... Is there a way that you can see doing that?

You talked about legislating the commission, as an example, but where can we move this to in order to give it an independence that separates it from these partisan attacks?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I'm glad you can see my enthusiasm to be here. I've missed some colleagues, and this is for me a chance to be back in the action with all of you. It's a privilege to be here.

I share entirely your concern. That's why, certainly as a starting point, having the Right Honourable David Johnston as the commissioner, as I think Mr. Lukiwski and others noted, sets up the commission, because of his role, to have a high level of independence and integrity. He, in my view, is absolutely the perfect person to fulfill that role.

He too has shared reflections exactly along the lines of what you've noted, concerning a greater legislated independence. Ultimately, in some future amendments of some elections act in some different parliament—or perhaps later in this parliament, if your committee and others want to work on that kind of change—that is in my view the ultimate assurance of independence: to legislate a structure, with the appropriate spending estimates to allow them to function independently.

The best way we could act, absent that legislation, is to use the order in council process in a transparent way to appoint Mr. Johnston, as I said, because I think doing so greatly improves the legitimate and perceived independence of the commission. It ensures also that we resist inadvertently making comments that would give the impression, as I've tried to be very precise not to do here, that the government is directing the commission, or would presume to direct him, for example, concerning what kind of advisory consultative structure he should have. Those questions should properly be

left to the commissioner. He should receive advice and input, obviously, from a wide range of people, including your committee.

Again, I would welcome your ideas. If the committee has specific ideas about how we can further strengthen that independence both substantively and in the perception of it, I think it behooves all of us to try to do that work together.

● (1230)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: There have been some comments and questions as to whether it's really even needed to have a commission like this. I know that you noted that the United States has a commission. I believe that Australia has one too.

I don't want to put you on the spot to provide more examples, but would your office be able to table a document that provides information to us on the other countries that have those?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Of course. We'd be happy to. I could see on my screen that Al Sutherland was nodding. He might know which major democracies have a permanent or ongoing structure. We'd be more than happy to table with your chair for all members the best information we have on that, and I would ask Privy Council to do that.

Al, can you, off the top of your head, name some of those countries?

Mr. Allen Sutherland: There are scores of them. I think we can provide a fuller list.

I think one of the bigger points is that, when the debates are run the way they were in 2019, the outreach and the number of Canadians engaged went up significantly, by almost a factor of two, and when you add that to the number of different formats that we used, the debates commission was successful in adding social media platform engagement. They really have quite an impressive package of engagement for Canadians. This makes it significantly different than what existed before.

The Chair: Thank you.

The committee also did a study on the commission. We had witnesses from many other commissions around the world come to testify as to what the best practices were. That's something you might also be interested in, looking back at that study and the report.

Thank you for sending us the information regarding that.

Monsieur Therrien, you have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. LeBlanc, you made a list of recommendations, which I read. I'm trying to imagine the impact they will have, but I'd like your opinion on this.

What are the implications of the eventual implementation of these recommendations? Will the costs be higher?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Are you talking about the recommendations related to the structure of the commission?

Mr. Alain Therrien: There are 10 or 12 recommendations in your report, and I've read them. I didn't see any implications, but I want to be sure.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I want to make sure I've understood your question so I can answer it accurately.

Are you talking about Commissioner Johnston's 10 recommendations?

Mr. Alain Therrien: Yes, they're in your report.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That's the report of the commission, of Mr. Johnston.

Of course, the Privy Council has consulted with Mr. Johnston to ensure that the amounts we have included in the estimates you're now considering were the right ones. Mr. Sutherland can give you a precise answer and assure you that the amounts allocated for these estimates are adequate. When I saw the recommendations, I saw it as a structural increase rather than a financial increase. The recommendations are mostly structural in nature.

Mr. Sutherland, do I have that right?

[English]

Mr. Allen Sutherland: Yes, you are right.

• (1235)

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay. Thank you.

Within this commission, how many full-time public service employees are there who do the work that needs to be done between elections?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Are you talking about full-time employees assigned to the commission?

Mr. Alain Therrien: That's right.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: We'll be able to provide you with that specific information.

Last summer, I ran into Michel Cormier, the commission's former executive director, in New Brunswick. He wasn't employed at the commission anymore, as the commission no longer existed. I don't know what his status was, whether he was full-time or part-time before the election, but I see Mr. Sutherland shaking his head.

That said, it is our pleasure to provide you with the number of full-time and part-time employees, Mr. Therrien.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay.

I'd also like to know if there are any outside employees, in other words contract employees. Could you provide us with that information? It would be greatly appreciated.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I will be pleased to give you that information.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I must admit that I'm very happy to see you doing so well. I've known you for a long time through television, but I've only known you personally for a short time. I've always appreciated your style and enthusiasm. I'm very happy to see you in

such good shape, and I wish you even more energy for the future, Mr. LeBlanc.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You're very generous.

I'm an example of the magic of your Quebec health care system. I'm very grateful, and I will be an admirer of the Quebec health care system for the rest of my life.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I just wanted to return to some of the previous conversation around the recommendations that the Chief Electoral Officer had made. I'm wondering if the government has a sense of a timeline for presenting legislative changes. Is the government looking favourably on the CEO's recommendations? Will you essentially be presenting what was in his annex, or is the government contemplating different changes beyond what was recommended by the Chief Electoral Officer?

There's a question about timeline and then there's a question about the substance of the changes.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I think all parliamentarians should be concerned about what we can do collectively in the very short term to get a consensus that would allow us to make the legislative amendments suggested by the Chief Electoral Officer in his report. Your committee is a central focus for this work and I know you are seized with that now. The government is also obviously working in parallel to ensure that we're in a position to have legislation ready. We have not made final decisions. There's been no cabinet decision around drafting instructions and so on, although the preparatory work has obviously been done since we saw the Chief Electoral Officer's report.

I'm prepared to offer my own personal views because, as I said, the government hasn't made a decision, cabinet hasn't made a decision yet.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I would be happy to hear your views but just before you offer those, one of the things that conduce best towards consensus is time. I'm wondering, then, if it would be a goal of the government to table legislation no later than December 11, so that if we're not able to pass anything before we rise for the Christmas break, we might at least be able to contemplate the government's proposal over the break and be ready to take action when we come back in January.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Again, your question, I think, is bang on. I would certainly be happy to work towards that goal. It's obviously easier for us, I'll be honest, if we have the benefit of your committee's report, if we have the benefit of your committee's deliberations, although we clearly follow the sessions that your committee has been having looking at the Chief Electoral Officer's report. I certainly take your comment that time is always helpful in building a consensus.

I have a very quick observation because I know we'll be out of time. I think the Chief Electoral Officer was clever and smart in asking for changes that would be time-limited and that would be directed at an election potentially in the context of a global pandemic. That's something that should concern all of us, and every Canadian.

I like the idea of expanding accessibility. Some of the things around long-term care homes, expanded hours for voting, again, in principle for me personally, make a lot of sense. I know your committee's had hearings on this. I've heard some colleagues talk about getting rid of the election day on Monday itself. We haven't made a decision. Election day being a Monday, having potential voting the weekend before in order to, again, reduce some of the public health concerns around crowded voting spaces.... Maybe I'm of the old gang, but having an election on a Monday is something that I've always found to be a happy and positive tradition. But we would look obviously to a consensus in Parliament.

The objective of expanding voting hours, making it more accessible in a safe way to people, particularly vulnerable people in long-term homes, and giving the Chief Electoral Officer additional tools to make adjustments, as he must in the context of an election in a pandemic that we couldn't have even contemplated eight years ago, seems to me to be very reasonable. I hope we can work with your committee quickly on that legislative change. I like the idea of people having a chance to consider it during their Christmas recess, so I'll try to work back from that December 11 date.

• (1240)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Doherty, you have five minutes, please.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Michael, I have a bunch of your stuff done. I'm putting things—

The Chair: Mrs. Vecchio, you're not on mute.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Karen, do have any of my stuff done, too? You have some of Michael's stuff done. What about mine?

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Any time [*Inaudible—Editor*].

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Perfect. It's like Maryam Monsef with the hot mike yesterday.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, on that point, you gave me a window.... Just exactly how much do you make?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You know what, it's a good question. I think it's higher than \$250, but I know it's less than my wife.

Mr. Todd Doherty: There you go.

Mr. Sutherland, would you be able to table with the committee all contracts let within the organization for the debates commission, please? That's a yes or no.

Mr. Allen Sutherland: I think I need to explain that. The debates commission is independent, so they would be the ones in position to answer that request.

Mr. Todd Doherty: All right, thank you.

I want to comment on Mr. Gerretsen's response, as well as something that you mentioned earlier, Dominic, on the geopolitical chal-

lenges we have with potential foreign interference and foreign actors. We are in a pandemic. All countries can be seen at their weakest point in terms of safety and security.

The report that we're doing is about holding an election during a pandemic and ensuring Canadians that it's safe and secure and that our democratic institutions are intact. I think the comment you made is germane to that report. I don't think we've asked for any of our security experts to come before the committee. Perhaps that would be something that we would have to have off-line. Minister, I'd be very interested in that meeting.

It is so important, to Mr. Gerretsen's comment, that everything that we do—whether it's this committee or the work yourself as a minister or the cabinet—that we can provide assurances to Canadians that democratic institutions are intact and that there is complete independence. You may or may not want to comment publicly, but perhaps the appointment of Mr. Kielburger, in hindsight, may have added to some of the concerns that Canadians and others may have had with respect to the independence of the debates commission.

I'm also very happy to see you. I think I said that earlier. I'll chime in like everybody else. Whoever the gentleman was from Europe, he was obviously young and vibrant, because you've got his blood and you look very young and vibrant now. It looks good on you and it's great to see you.

I'm wondering if you can comment further about the safety and security of our democratic institutions, and perhaps on getting those security advisers to our committee to have that meeting. I would take you up on that offer.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I share very much your concern about protecting Canadian democracy from foreign interference.

As you know, before the 2019 election, Karina Gould put forward a plan. It was ambitious: almost \$50 million over three years to ensure that not only was our security and intelligence community able to prepare citizens, sort of, as we talked about with Mr. Gerretsen and others, improving citizen awareness and resilience, but we also set up an organizational structure in the Government of Canada including access to the G7 rapid response mechanism. We set up a new security and intelligence threat to elections task force. We had a public protocol where, during a writ period, if there was determined to be a sufficient threat to a safe, fair and free election under way in Canada, the Clerk of the Privy Council, with other senior officials of the public service responsible for intelligence and security agencies, would have an obligation to publicly disclose that to Canadians in an electoral context. But we can always do more.

After the election, we asked Jim Judd, a former senior security and intelligence official of the Government of Canada, to review what was done in 2019 and make recommendations to strengthen that.

Madam Chair, with the only proviso.... I want to make sure that I'm offering up security and intelligence senior officials to the committee. I'm happy to do that, but I'll make sure that the Privy Council, Madam Chair, consults with your office on the proper way to do it. My instinct is it's probably an in camera meeting, obviously, if you want to have a more detailed discussion with these officials.

I think it would be interesting for members of the committee to have some of the briefings that I had after the last election in terms of their preparation for the next one, because Mr. Doherty properly raises an issue that all of us should be concerned about. We shouldn't be smug and think we're immune from this kind of potential interference. Canadians deserve to know that every step possible to safeguard our elections is in place. I personally think that's the case, but I would be happy to share, within the measure of what's possible, probably in an in-camera meeting with members of the committee and with officials briefing you directly.

Madam Chair, if it's the desire of the committee I'll ask the Privy Council to work with your office to figure out who the appropriate officials are and what the appropriate security context is to provide you that information.

• (1245)

The Chair: Absolutely. I think that would be very interesting. I'm seeing some nodding and thumbs up. Have your office get in touch with my office, and we will arrange something in the near future.

Mr. Alghabra, you have five minutes.

Hon. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. If you could just let me know when, I would like to leave some time at the end of my round to give Dr. Duncan an opportunity to ask a question.

Minister, I am not going to butter you up like the rest of my colleagues. I'm already your parliamentary secretary and I have to deal with you—

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Omar, you shouldn't talk about buttering me up. You didn't see the greasy grilled cheese sandwich I stuffed into my face during some of the questions. Don't talk about buttering up.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: In all seriousness, I want to pick up on some lines of thinking or questions that were asked. Let me start by saying that a fundamental part of a democracy is an objective, fair and legitimate election.

How important is the debate to the electors? How important is the debate to the voters?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Omar, thank you for your help and your service as a parliamentarian as well.

I think it's fundamental. Again, I'm going by some research I read some years ago. It was an academic paper, I think, around the point in a general election when Canadians typically make up their minds. For the vast majority of people who don't know how they're

going to vote when the election starts, or are less than very certain, and/or changed their minds during the course of an election—because that also happens, as we've seen in some previous elections—the widely accessible, appropriately formatted leaders' debates are absolutely critical to helping Canadian citizens make up their minds in terms of how they're voting.

Again going by memory, I saw some research that said it's typically in the 72 hours following the leaders' debates, which are typically in the last third of an election, that people who are undecided or perhaps are wavering actually come to a decision on how they're going to vote. It tends to lock in, in some cases, in those last seven to 10 days, but following a leaders' debate. As Al Sutherland pointed out, if we were able to double the accessibility to Canadians of that debate in 2019, as compared with 2015, let's aim to go even higher in the next general election.

• (1250)

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Just because the private sector is able to do it, isn't there wisdom in making sure that we need an independent institution to ensure the protection of voters' right to access such debate?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That's exactly the question. If you're with a particular TV network or social media platform, you may not have an interest, or it may not be accessible to a wide range of people who want to follow the debate. That's why having a signal produced by an independent commission with the highest standards of integrity, independence and journalistic ethics, but making that available free and very broadly, as Al Sutherland said, on social media platforms to television and radio networks, speaks to exactly that accessibility that I think Canadians expect to have during an election debate. That's why picking and choosing private networks or other venues doesn't necessarily suit that broad accessibility, which I think benefits every Canadian voter.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Minister.

I'll ask Ms. Duncan to ask her question.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you so much to my dear colleague and friend.

Minister, I am going to come back to health and safety, if I may. I'm really concerned about our residents in long-term care. Remembrance Day has just passed, and many in long-term care are veterans and family members of veterans, and we owe them a debt of gratitude. We owe all of our seniors who have helped build this country safe and dignified care. The greatest tragedy of the pandemic is the lives lost in long-term care homes. Should an election be called, I want to ensure the health and safety of those in long-term care. When I looked at just Ontario alone yesterday, there were 100 long-term care homes in outbreak with over 700 resident cases and over 500 staff cases.

Through our work here, we've heard recommendations like no polling stations in long-term care, no election workers in long-term care, no taking residents out of the home to vote and use of mail-in ballots.

I'm just wondering if you would like to share with the committee any ideas you have about ensuring the health and safety of our long-term care residents while ensuring their right to vote.

Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I noted in the Chief Electoral Officer's report that considerable attention was paid to exactly that challenge. It would be unacceptable to disenfranchise the residents of these long-term care homes. My mother was in a long-term care home in Ottawa until January of this year, so I fully understand the importance of ensuring accessibility to these residents, to these people who deserve a right to vote, but they deserve a right to vote safely in a way that's based on the best advice from public health experts.

That's why I agree with one of the suggestions of Monsieur Perrault, the Chief Electoral Officer, of expanding accessibility through mobile polls that they would be able to visit in a properly distanced, safe way. That has to be based on the advice of public health experts, assuming that can be done, and I think we've heard views of public health experts that it can be.

The more opportunities you have to get those residents to vote in a safe way, the better it is. In other words, the longer period they could access voting—and you're more of an expert in this than I am, Kirsty—would improve the safety factors necessary for them to participate and not be in a compromised circumstance in terms of their own health or the health of other residents.

I particularly like Chief Electoral Officer Perrault's suggestion of a larger window to get residents of long-term care homes to vote, but, obviously, that has to be done with the expertise of public health authorities. Some homes will be different from others, because of exactly, as you said, the tragic outbreaks that we're seeing currently in this second wave. You mentioned Ontario. I had briefings as the chair of the cabinet committee on COVID on Manitoba and other provinces. It's a concern across the country, so you're right to raise it.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister LeBlanc.

That ends the formal rounds of questions we have. We really thank you for being present with us for almost two hours now.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You're kicking me out before the two hours is over, Ruby.

The Chair: It's just a few minutes, I think.

I just wanted to say, on behalf of all the members who probably didn't get the time in during their questioning rounds, that we are

really happy to see your health bounce back and to see you here. We're really pleased that you were able to be with us, and your jovial nature and your willingness to always answer as fully as possible is appreciated. Thank you.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you, Ruby. Thank you, colleagues.

Al Sutherland was taking notes, as well as Manon Paquet, and we'll provide as quickly as we can the specific things that we undertook to provide to you, Madam Chair, so you can distribute them to committee members. Please don't hesitate to reach out if we can be helpful. I'll also follow up with the appropriate context for a briefing from security and intelligence officials for your committee.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Fantastic. We appreciate it.

Have a good rest of your day.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You don't see the dessert I'm about to have, Ruby. Thank you.

The Chair: You're going to have a really good rest of your day, then.

Thank you.

To the rest of the committee, I just wanted to quickly mention, as I did at the outset, that we weren't able to get that Wednesday time slot in the evening, so our next meeting is Thursday, which is our usual time slot. We're going to have Elections Canada on the main estimates and the supplementary estimates. The senior officials will be accompanying Monsieur Perrault.

On the 24th we will have the Speaker and House of Commons administration and PPS on the same estimates.

On November 26 we have a three-hour meeting with panellists for our COVID report.

As I mentioned at the beginning, because this Thursday's meeting is the two-hour meeting, the next following few meetings are longer.

I'm going to try to secure maybe an extra hour so we can have subcommittee time to plan out the prorogation study at that time. Look in your emails for a notice as to whether the subcommittee meeting will be happening this Thursday. Hopefully, if we can secure it, you should receive notice tomorrow.

Thank you. I hope everyone has a wonderful day.

The meeting is adjourned.

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