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

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, December 5, 2017**

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**Chair**

**The Honourable Larry Bagnell**



## Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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• (1150)

[English]

**The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)):** I call the meeting to order.

Good morning. Welcome to the 83rd meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. Today's meeting is being televised.

I'll ask members if they could stay until 1:15 or so to try to get as much done as possible, because we've lost some time due to the votes.

**Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC):** I can't.

**The Chair:** You guys can't either?

We're normally scheduled to go until 1:10, though, because of the extra five minutes, so we'll go to 1:10. In the last five minutes, we'll do a little bit of committee business.

As we continue our study of the creation of an independent commissioner responsible for leaders' debates, we are pleased to be joined by Catherine Cano, president and general manager, Cable Public Affairs Channel, and Peter Van Dusen, executive producer. We're delighted to have you here—I know you're both very busy—and we look forward to your input on this interesting topic. Something came up, so the *Globe and Mail* person couldn't be here. You'll get more time, which should be great.

You could make some opening comments.

**Ms. Catherine Cano (President and General Manager, Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC)):** Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

I want to say how much we appreciate your invitation and the opportunity to participate in the committee's discussions on democracy and the best way to handle leaders' debates during federal elections. This is complex, but extremely important, work.

Joining me today is CPAC's director of information, Peter Van Dusen. Our opening remarks will be brief.

[English]

Let me first say that the work this committee has undertaken is important and the subject matter is very complex. Most democracies have the same debates over the debates and struggle with many of

the same issues we have here in Canada. We're not alone in trying to figure out what is best for our country and for our people. To complicate things further, the ways citizens are consuming and accessing information are changing and expanding at each election cycle, adding new opportunities and also new challenges.

We have followed the first few meetings of this committee with great interest and have been heartened to hear that this committee, and indeed all parliamentarians, hold CPAC, the Cable Public Affairs Channel, and its role in high regard. Perhaps I can begin there.

For the last 25 years—and by the way, this is our anniversary year—CPAC has built and fiercely maintained a reputation for independence, balance, fairness, and political impartiality. It's not just a slogan for us; it's our mission statement. We believe that Canadians have come to count on us, knowing that we have only one interest in mind—theirs.

Through our coverage of Parliament, politics, and public affairs; election campaigns and conventions; and our digital initiatives to engage Canadians, especially young people, to better understand their democratic institutions, we are the window on the democracy we have and the builders of the democracy we want.

[Translation]

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen (Executive Producer, Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC)):** Our role is never as important as at election time, bringing us to the committee's topic of study: the proposal to create a commission or an independent commissioner responsible for overseeing leaders' debates during federal election campaigns.

I would like to take a moment to tell you about the role CPAC played during the last federal election, in 2015.

[English]

We offered to carry any and all debates at which the party leaders agreed to appear. We did not organize any debates. We became the carrier for others. There were five debates in all. We felt it was fundamentally important to the democratic process for CPAC to make these debates available to Canadians everywhere, even if they were not the traditional consortium-sponsored debates.

We didn't set the rules and we didn't decide the format—we left that to the debate organizers—but we made sure that all Canadians had access to the debates. We put the interests of Canadians first.

To be clear, CPAC was not then, and never has been, a member of the consortium of mainstream broadcasters, although we have always purchased access to the debates from the consortium and carried them on all CPAC platforms.

We also understand that leaders' debates aren't the only defining moments of campaigns. That's why we believe we have the most extensive national coverage of grassroots campaigns of any media outlet in the country. We provide half-hour riding profiles of the key election races unfolding across the country, almost 70 races in the last election alone.

What role would CPAC be prepared to play in future elections as it relates to leaders' debates? Our answer is simple: just let us know how we can help.

However, please consider a few things. As we've stated, we place our reputation for fairness, independence, and impartiality above all else. We feel that organizing debates and deciding who's in and who's out could easily jeopardize those hard-won attributes and threaten that reputation. Fights over the rules and invitations are in part why the consortium model collapsed.

CPAC prefers to occupy the neutral ground and then deliver the content once the rules have been established—in this case, through the proposal before the committee being adopted by the commission or commissioner and those rules being set in that way, or through some other mechanism that may come from this process.

• (1155)

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** As always, we would be interested in bringing the debates to all Canadians once the rules are established and approved by all involved. We also would like to point out that CPAC works on a weekly and mostly daily basis in partnership with all media organizations, including members of the consortium.

We value this collaborative approach. We strongly believe, especially at election time, that what matters most is giving Canadians all the information they need and want to understand the issues at stake and to know the leaders who are seeking their trust.

We welcome working with all to ensure election debates are distributed as widely as possible on all platforms.

[*Translation*]

In conclusion, we are very proud of the work we do to provide Canadians with direct access to their democracy, democratic process, and democratic institutions. We would happily consider options to build on that role to the benefit of Canadians.

Thank you for listening. We would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

[*English*]

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

We'll have time for one round, one slot of seven minutes for each party. If you want to share that, it's up to you.

Mr. Graham is first.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.):** Thank you for being here. It's nice to see you again, Ms. Cano.

Mr. Van Dusen, I've been watching you for some 16 years on CPAC, since you've been there. It's nice to meet you in person.

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** Thanks very much.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** One thing you said in your opening comments struck me. You said you have purchased the debates from the networks. What did that cost? What's the deal?

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** To be specific, are you talking about purchasing the consortium debates or all the debates we've carried in the last election?

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** I mean the consortium debates.

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** Okay.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** It's the consortium debates. I'm curious how they handled that, because we didn't know about the purchased part.

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** Right.

There's typically a fee that all broadcasters pay to be part of the consortium debate. I'm not sure that's public information or if people give out that fee. It's part of a business arrangement, so I'm not sure I'm at liberty to say what that is today.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** All right.

Would CPAC be interested or willing to host debates directly? Is that something that you'd want to do?

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** That's a good question. You're talking about being a host broadcaster, as with the Olympics or something like that.

I think we're open to ways in which we could contribute. It depends what it is and what we're talking about.

What we don't want to do is decide who's in and who's out. We don't want to be in that space. As for contributing in other ways, it will really depend on what the committee comes up with at the end of the day—what will be recommended, what the role will be, how the roles will be decided, and all that.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** Okay.

If there is a commission or commissioner, do you think it is reasonable or unreasonable that the main broadcaster be required to carry debates—at least one debate in each language, for example? Is that a good idea, a bad idea, or do you have no opinion?

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** I think it is up to this committee to decide. I don't think it's CPAC's role to determine that.

I can tell you one thing: as far as we are concerned, we certainly feel that it's important for citizens to have access to as much information as possible during an election. Debates are important, so we will carry as many as we can. I'm hoping that the solution will help to favour Canadians' understanding of the choice they have in front of them. We certainly would do that.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** Understood.

You've broadcast most or all of the debates that have happened over the last few elections. Can you give us a sense of audience numbers from election to election?

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** I think those are public. The numbers we had for 2015—I don't have the ones before that—were aggregated numbers of all the people broadcasting, which included CPAC and a couple of others. There were five debates. If you cumulate the reach of all of them, it's a bit under 10 million, but we're talking about the reach.

•(1200)

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** If it was, say, two million per debate, it might be the same two million over and over again.

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** It could be. There's no way to know—or maybe there is a way to know, but we don't know if it's the same people who have been watching all the debates.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** You don't have the numbers in front of you, but in ballpark figures, do you remember what it was like when the consortium had their debates? Was it a much higher number than that?

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** You know what? I don't know for sure. I know there's a number that's been going around of about 14 million for the one debate—or maybe the two, including the French one. You should double-check that with them. I wouldn't want you to take my word for it.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** Do you think the commission is an important thing to have? Is it necessary?

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** Again, that's a good question.

For CPAC, it's not our role to decide on election policy. I think you'll have a chance to meet and hear from experts on democracy, and you'll have more of those people. I'm sure you will have many options in front of you.

One of the things we were talking about that we think is needed—and maybe it could help in your thinking as you're going through this process—is what we call a “3P” approach. What's important to have for this democracy to work is predictability, participation, and partnership.

What we mean by predictability is that voters have expectations. They need to know that there are going to be debates, who's going to carry them, when they're going to be, and where are they going to be. I think it would be helpful if we could have those things decided.

The participation part is about who will set the rules to decide who participates in the debate or who is invited to the debate, and what the criteria are and why. I think that if there is clarity on that aspect, it's going to be extraordinarily helpful.

The third thing we were thinking of is partnership. What's the best way to ensure or engage co-operation among all of the media organizations so that, as widely as possible, the debates are seen by all Canadians?

For us, making sure those three aspects are dealt with will be helpful to ensuring that those debates are fair and neutral.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** Do you think there's any role for either CPAC, on your own, or a commission or commissioner in

local debates, as opposed to national leaders' debates, in terms of advising or carrying them or any aspect of it?

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** Let me answer that in two ways.

The biggest challenge for us is working on trying to figure out what's needed to ensure the three Ps that Catherine talked about. How do we ensure that if we're going to have debates, we know when they are, who's attending, and who's going to carry them?

I think you'll have to figure out what the “it” is before organizations like CPAC can decide what kind of role we can play in the “it” and what role we're prepared to play.

We're a small operation, to be frank, but we like to think we punch above our weight in a lot of areas. One of those areas is on the local side. If there are local debates, we would happily entertain that idea.

As I mentioned, we were in 70 ridings in the last election campaign, profiling ridings we thought would have an important outcome on the election result. Some of that coverage of the riding profile included local debates, with candidates getting together on a Tuesday night at a hall somewhere in the riding. It may have been in some of your ridings. I don't have the list in front of me. There's a good chance we've been to some of your ridings at some point. We're open to that.

As we said in our opening remarks, we understand that campaigns are about more than leaders' debates. We understand the process. We understand that people don't vote for prime ministers in this country, but for parties, and the leader of that party becomes the prime minister if that party wins the election. There's a great deal of importance in what happens at the local level. We get that. That's why we're at the local level a lot during campaigns.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** They vote for people. Thank you very much for that.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Graham.

Let's go on to Mr. Nater.

**Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today. It's great to have you.

First of all, I want to thank you for airing debates in the last election campaign. We had the witnesses here last week from the major broadcasters who opted to air *Coronation Street* and reruns of the *The Big Bang Theory* instead, so I appreciate your airing those in the public interest.

One of the concerns they expressed was the journalistic standards of the debates and the production values. You obviously aired the debates. Were there any concerns on your end about journalistic standards or production values?

● (1205)

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** This is always a bit of a tricky question. I was principally involved in that decision-making, and my thinking was that these were all reputable organizations trying something new. They're all known for good journalism, so we took the position that it would be in the greater interest of democracy to show people what is available. Having not organized them and not passed judgment on who is able to do what, it was more important, in our case, to give Canadians an opportunity to see debates in some form.

To my mind you can't answer questions of how good the journalism is until you see the product, so we made a decision. Look, this is *Maclean's* and this is the *Globe*; let's see what they have on offer, because right now it's all that's on offer. Therefore, let's show it to Canadians and let's perform what I would call an aerial view of the importance of what's happening in the campaign and make sure that we put the democratic process above important questions about the quality of production and quality of journalism and leave that for viewers to decide after we've aired the debate.

**Mr. John Nater:** Just clearing up a little on the variety of debates, do you see it as a positive in election campaigns to have different styles and different types of debates, rather than just one English and one French, and having a different variety, perhaps even on different subject matter?

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** Yes, I would think so. It could work. It depends on the length of the campaign as well. I think one of the considerations is whether that is for you, but yes, I think we were happy with the different format, and it gives different ways to go at questions and themes, for sure.

**Mr. John Nater:** Switching gears a little, CPAC has a great iPad app that I'm a big fan of. It's great to use to follow along when I'm not physically in the House or physically at a TV.

If you don't have the viewership numbers today, could you provide to the committee what your online viewership was for those five debates during the last campaign, and in CPAC's airing in general, what you've seen over time in the increase of online and digital viewership over the past few years?

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** It's a very good question. I do not have the numbers for the last election. I don't know if we have them. I wasn't there at the time, but I will look into it and I will forward any information I have.

The number of people going on our website and app has grown extraordinarily in the last couple of years for sure, so there is an audience in a digital space.

**Mr. John Nater:** I'm going to ask one more question and then I'll throw it to Kevin Waugh for the last minute or so.

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Mr. John Nater:** We heard some leering from Elections Canada about becoming too involved with the negotiations on decision-making. It seemed to echo somewhat your comments that you don't necessarily want to get into the weeds and get into decision-making that could jeopardize your impartiality. Would you suggest to the committee that our recommendations be very specific in how a debate ought to be conducted and who should participate, or would

you rather see a commission or commissioner given latitude to make those decisions outside your decision-making power?

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** Again, I think your work will be a great opportunity to hear all the views and options in front of you. It's hard to know the best thing now. With a body, is it appropriate to enforce predictability on all stakeholders, as we talked about? What kind of power and enforcement would that have? Is there any other way to go at it?

I think you have a chance to hear great experts on that point, and we are looking forward to seeing the options. It's a bit difficult to know at this point, but I think those are probably the questions you should ask.

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

**The Chair:** Kevin Waugh, welcome to the committee. You have two minutes.

**Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC):** Thank you. Two minutes is lots.

The basic cable fee includes CPAC, as you know, across this country. You are the political channel, as it's turned out, in this country. I know there are different views about the production costs and pooled resources, but I would like to see the commissioner...and I've talked to you about this, Catherine. CPAC is the political channel. You have the experience, 24-7, and I think it's important that CPAC lead this for the next debate.

We are seeing a meltdown with CTV, CBC, and Global-Corus. It's important. I've talked to you about this a number of times. This is your time to move into what Canadians want to see. You're on the basic channels. We pay a fee. Every household in this country pays a fee to CPAC. This is your time, I feel, to structure this with the commission, to come forward for 2019.

What are your thoughts on that?

● (1210)

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** Well, first of all, thank you very much for your vote of confidence. We're really proud of what the channel is accomplishing and its reputation over 25 years. I've been with it for not even two years, so it's the work of all my team that I'm praising.

It is a good question. We want to help as much as we can. We don't know what kinds of rules, what kind of body or entity, or what kinds of recommendations the committee will make, so it's a bit difficult for us to actually commit to something that is unknown. We're happy to be part of the process. If there are even more questions afterwards, we're looking forward to answering them. We want to be part of it, but we have to be mindful that the strength of CPAC actually comes from its impartiality. We're going to look at being able to preserve those things.

Our preference is to be helpful once we know what the rules are and what the committee actually comes up with.

**Mr. Kevin Waugh:** The key with CPAC is that you are impartial.

If I can, Mr. Chair—

**The Chair:** No, sorry. Your time's up.

**Mr. Kevin Waugh:** We'll talk to you later. Thanks.

**The Chair:** The last intervenor is Mr. Garrison. Welcome to the committee.

**Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP):** Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. I was here at the beginning of this debate, but I've been in and out.

I want to start by also echoing thanks to CPAC. I know that in my riding you have fans, a lot of fans, a surprising number. I think sometimes we underestimate the access that CPAC provides. Sometimes people focus on the overall viewership, but I know that when an issue in my riding is important locally, people use CPAC. Even if they don't watch regularly, they know to go there to get informed.

The other thing you do, which I think is very valuable, is that during elections, you provide the 70 riding profiles you mentioned. I was just trying to remember. I've run four times, only twice successfully, and I don't blame you for that.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** Thank you for that.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** You've done riding profiles, I think, all four times in my riding.

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** It's always been an important riding. It's a contested riding.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** It has been.

The other thing that's important about that is that it's sometimes difficult in British Columbia to get a sense of what's happening in the rest of the country. I think those riding profiles are very, very useful to voters in my riding who want to see what's happening elsewhere in the country. I am just encouraging CPAC to keep that up, because I think it's an important service that sometimes people don't think about.

I guess I'd give you a warning on local debates. Sometimes local debates are a little less than high standard in their organization and their journalism. In my riding we usually have about eight, and we have long debates about who can participate, who can't participate, which candidates are in, and which candidates are out. We even had one incident in which a registered party removed their candidate from the set just before the broadcast was to begin. I think you should exercise a lot of caution about local debates.

To get back to the main topic here, I appreciate the openness you've expressed to doing whatever makes things more accessible to Canadians. I think that's the reputation you have, and you're upholding that today. My question really is about how we maximize the ability to view. I don't favour a fine or disqualification for not doing leaders' debates, but how do we really make them accessible? It's one thing to say they're broadcast, but how do we make them more accessible in terms of format and those kinds of things? I'm not

saying you should set it, but do you have ideas on how the debates could be more accessible to the public? I know a lot of people may tune in for a couple of minutes and then feel that they're not for them.

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** We're into new territory. With the last election and the collapse of the consortium model, we're into new territory. It's a blank canvas.

The idea of how to make them more accessible I think comes back to the third “p” that we talked about, the partnership idea. I'll be really interested to see what comes forward from the committee and then the minister's consultations.

Backtracking slightly on Mr. Waugh's question and the idea of “lead it”, I'm back to what is “it”? Until we have a better idea of what “it” is, it's hard to know what role we can play in leading or participating in anything, but we're open to it.

Specifically to your question, you open up partnerships. If you start from a default position that the rules have changed, and the primary concern of office-holders across the country and of organizations such as ours is broader access to democracy, then if that's the default position, we need as many people as possible to be able to see these debates.

Then the question becomes how we do it. If we open up the partnership idea—that nobody owns the debate, nobody owns the night that the debate is on, nobody owns access to the debate, and that these debates are to be made available to all Canadians on any platforms—then the question begins to answer itself. If everybody in these particular spaces now knows that there are no restrictions on getting access to the debate, they will find a way to get it to their particular market of people, and everybody will be better served.

● (1215)

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** We did see—and I guess I'm thinking back to 2011 and the consortium debates—some ideas of asking voters to submit questions and trying to involve and engage voters more in the actual process of the debate.

I wonder if you as a journalist have any opinions on whether engaging the public is helpful or not.

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** I would go back to what I said. If the debate is available to everybody, people can do what they want with it. “Watch our debate because we're featuring this kind of input. Watch this debate because we're featuring that kind of input. We're providing this accessibility, this kind of approach to how we cover it.” I mean, there are lots of options as to where this can go.

Some people may say, “If it's carried on one channel, we're not really interested in the viewer question thing.” However, we're doing this other model, but we're taking the feed of the debate and treating it differently. We maybe have a debate—we've talked about this a bit—in which we don't challenge the answers for veracity during the debate, but we provide a 90-minute post-debate show that's going to fact-check everything that was said.

Those are different models that people can bring. If everybody has access to a debate, then they can decide how they want to treat it in their own coverage.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** I guess in essence what you're saying is that more debates than one, and more models than one will—

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** It could be numbers of debates, but available to any outlet that wants them. As long as they take the substance of the debate, they can treat it differently in terms of their audience and how they want to encourage participation.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** In terms of who would actually make these decisions, do you have any opinions about a commission versus a commissioner? Do you think that one person can be expected to manage this process and be seen as neutral, or would it be better to have a committee of people—CPAC—deliver an opinion on that?

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** Not really. I think we will let the committee come up with the—

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** You're not going to help us out on that.

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** Well, it's difficult to know. It's complex. You have a difficult task in figuring this out, and who this person or this group would report to. There are a lot of questions you have to ask and get answers for.

You know, I think experts on democracy, the people who have been there.... I'm sure you're looking at other countries as well. Other places in the world and how they do that might be some inspiration.

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** We're not here to weigh in on what model you come down on.

The idea is that if you can find predictability and determine participation and figure out a way to encourage partnership—I don't know whether that requires an office-holder or a different kind of approach—and you can answer those kinds of concerns for us and others, that will serve the process.

**The Chair:** Thank you for coming.

As you can see, we all enjoy CPAC very much. We respect the way you do business, so we appreciate your being here today.

**Mr. Peter Van Dusen:** Thank you.

**Ms. Catherine Cano:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** We're going to suspend while we get the next panel up.

•(1215) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

•(1220)

**The Chair:** We'll reconvene meeting number 83 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

If you remember, at the last meeting I asked you for any final input on witnesses for the rest of the study. We'll do any changes to the proposed schedule at the end of this meeting.

This afternoon's witnesses are Diane Bergeron, vice-president, engagement and international affairs, and Thomas Simpson, manager, operations and government affairs at the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. They have passed out a handout.

As well, we have Frank Folino, president of the Canadian Association for the Deaf, so you can see sign language here. You can tell us if we're going too fast at any time for the sign language.

We also have James Hicks, national coordinator for the Council of Canadians with Disabilities.

You'll each have a chance to give an opening statement, and then there will be questions from each party. There will be a seven-minute round of questions for the person, and that includes both your answer and the question, so just keep that in mind when you're providing your answers.

We'll start with the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. Perhaps you would like to make some opening comments.

•(1225)

**Ms. Diane Bergeron (Vice-President, Engagement and International Affairs, Canadian National Institute for the Blind):** Thank you very much.

I'd like to first thank the committee for inviting us to come today. I'm Diane Bergeron, and with me is Thomas Simpson.

CNIB has been around for almost a hundred years. We were founded in 1918 to serve veterans coming back from World War I who came back war-blinded and also to serve people who were blinded through the Halifax explosion. We provide services and skills training to individuals who are blind and partially sighted to help them navigate in their environment and be safe in their external and internal environments, and we provide charitable programs, such as peer supports and camps for kids and so on.

We do some advocacy work and we help to educate the public on the needs of people who are blind or partially sighted. The 2012 StatsCan report indicated that almost three-quarters of a million people in Canada identify as having sight loss. That's a lot of people who will be voting in the next election.

I'd like you to imagine that the handout we provided you just before the session started is all the information that you're going to need to determine who the next prime minister of Canada is. This is your document. You can read it, you can learn, and that is the only form of information that you will have to ensure that you make an informed decision when you are choosing who you will vote for in your next election. Understandably, unless anybody here has learned Braille in the past little while, you probably are looking at that document and wondering how in God's name you are going to do that. That is what people who are blind or partially sighted in Canada deal with in every election.

We are often invited to go to debates or to listen to debates on TV, and things are shown—images, documents. We get people coming to our door, doing door knocking, and they hand us documentation that is not accessible to us. We go to websites to look at party platforms. They're not accessible to screen readers and other devices for people who are blind or partially sighted.



It is impossible for me to do what I have a right to do in this country, which is vote for the people who I want to represent me in the political arena. It is also an obligation, but it's impossible for me to do that as a person who's totally blind, and to do it as an informed decision, if all I have to access is a minor amount of information. I have the right as a Canadian to access the electoral process the same as everybody else. Unfortunately, that access is not always provided.

In order to ensure we do have the ability to make an informed choice, we have some recommendations. I'm going to ask Thomas to go through them with you.

**Mr. Thomas Simpson (Manager, Operations and Government Affairs, Canadian National Institute for the Blind):** Thank you, Diane.

CNIB supports the creation of an independent commission or commissioner for the leadership debates during an election as long as the following points are included to ensure that accessibility is provided for Canadians who are blind or partially sighted.

If a leadership debate is broadcast on television, it must include descriptive audio. If visual aids are used, either by a party leader or moderators, it must be described to those who are watching. This includes names put onto a screen or a PowerPoint presentation if one is used. It's recommended by CNIB that the committee should connect with Accessible Media Incorporated, or AMI, a not-for-profit company that entertains, informs, and empowers Canadians who are blind or partially sighted or have hearing impairments. It runs three broadcast services: AMI-tv and AMI-audio, both in English, and AMI-télé in French. AMI-tv broadcasts a selection of general entertainment programming with accommodations for those who are visually or hearing impaired, with audio descriptions and closed captioning available. AMI is an expert in incorporating accessibility on television and should be consulted to make leadership debates accessible for Canadians to the greatest possible extent.

Similarly, the use of ASL and LSQ—American Sign Language and *langue des signes québécoise*—is necessary for Canadians who are deaf and deaf-blind. In order to get the greatest number of people to tune in to leadership debates, it should be marketed and advertised in an effective manner. This means not only in conventional print: it should be spread through as many means as possible, such as TV, radio, or ads before YouTube videos.

This brings me to leadership debates online. If future leadership debates can be streamed online, websites to view those debates should be accessible. This means they can be accessed with an assistive device and will be easily navigable. Any website that hosts future leadership debates must be tested by people with various sight disabilities to ensure the best accessibility. For example, any videos or question submission boxes must be tested for use by a screen reader or a screen magnifier. Any website should also have good colour contrast.

We thank the procedure and house affairs committee for inviting CNIB to testify, and we welcome any questions you may have.

• (1230)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. We appreciate that.

*Maintenant* we have Frank Folino, president of the Canadian Association of the Deaf.

**Mr. Frank Folino (President, Canadian Association of the Deaf) [Interpretation]:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me to appear before this committee as part of your study of a proposal to create an independent commission or commissioners to organize political party leaders' debates during the federal election campaigns.

My name is Frank Folino, and I'm president of the Canadian Association of the Deaf-Association des Sourds du Canada. The CAD-ASC is a national information research and community action organization of deaf people in Canada. Founded in 1940, CAD-ASC provides consultation and information on deaf issues to the public, business, media, educators, governments, and others. We also conduct research and collect data.

CAD-ASC promotes and protects the rights, needs, and concerns of deaf people who use American sign language, ASL, and *langue des signes québécoise*, LSQ.

CAD-ASC is affiliated with the World Federation of the Deaf and is a United Nations-accredited non-governmental organization on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Sign language is recognized seven times within five different articles through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which Canada ratified in March 2010. It refers to our rights, outlined in the convention, to address the articles that relate directly to signed languages.

In Canada, deaf people use ASL and LSQ to reflect that we embrace diversity, inclusiveness, and core values, and that we are committed to maintaining an inclusive environment in Canadian society. Many countries have legally recognized signed languages. Such recognition in Canada would ensure the removal of barriers and provide equal access, which is an important step towards becoming an inclusive and accessible Canada as we integrate into both English and French societies.

Too often accessibility issues have been an afterthought in federal political party leaders' debates. It is clear that there are accessibility issues that are barriers for deaf and hard of hearing people. They could not participate in the process of a national debate, whether televised or on social media platforms. In previous federal political party leaders' debates, there was lack of sign language interpretation and closed captioning in social media platforms throughout the televised debates.

To make future political party leaders' debates accessible for deaf people who require access to information, we would like to see sign language interpretation in ASL for English debates and in LSQ for French debates. This would include picture-in-picture onscreen, and closed captioning in English and French. We as deaf people can participate and be privy to what's happening during the debate to have a good understanding of the different platforms that candidates have. If interpreting services are not provided throughout, we don't fully understand what people are talking about.

Obviously the language during the debate is elevated and sophisticated, and without having access to ASL or LSQ during those debates, we don't know for whom we are voting, so when we get to the polls on election day, we're not making a truly informed choice. That's another good example of how we are not really included in society as deaf people in the way that other Canadians and other citizens are.

We don't have true access in our own language. We do have it in French and English, but of course those are the languages that are predominant among other people. We're looking to gain not only access to interpreters, but access to information. Oftentimes we're faced with information that is in English or French, so we would like to ensure that the federal leaders' debates during future election campaigns provide services to make the information accessible not only in English and French but in signed languages as well, so that we can truly access the information in our language.

This demonstrates how an independent commission or commissioners can take a positive approach to include deaf people by way of making their information accessible when it comes to organizing the leaders' debates during future election campaigns. The creation of an independent commission or commissioner will provide the opportunity to address these accessibility issues to ensure an inclusive and accessible Canada. It's important that an accessibility lens is being implemented, which is described in the quote below:

An Accessibility Lens is a tool for identifying and clarifying issues affecting persons with disabilities used by policy and program developers and analysts to access and address the impact of all initiatives (policies, programs or decisions) on persons with disabilities. It is also a resource in creating policies and programs reflective of the rights and needs of persons with disabilities.

● (1235)

We would like to see the establishment of an accessibility advisory committee, with lists of experts to advise the independent commission or commissioners to ensure that the implementation of access services is being planned well in advance.

The accessibility lens in organizing political party leaders' debates during federal election campaigns will have to ensure that accessibility will be a forethought, not an afterthought. This will address the barriers we face, because they are significant for us. Sign language interpretation during the political leaders' debates allows us to participate through sign language, which is important to our community.

An inclusive and accessible Canada will impact over a million deaf, deaf-blind, and hard of hearing Canadians who want to be involved in the decision-making process during the elections, which they have every right to fully participate in, through access to information in sign language so they are able to make their own choice to elect political candidates democratically.

I would be pleased to answer your questions regarding accessibility issues and organizing future leaders' debates during future election campaigns. I trust the committee will be able to address these important accessibility issues for our democracy.

*Merci.*

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Next is Mr. James Hicks, national coordinator of the Council of Canadians with Disabilities.

**Mr. James Hicks (National Coordinator, Council of Canadians with Disabilities):** Hello, everyone. My name is James Hicks, and I'm with the Council of Canadians with Disabilities.

We also want to thank you for allowing us to come and talk about what we feel are some of the issues around elections and people's understanding of leaders' debates.

Just so that you know something about CCD, we're a national human rights organization "of" people with various disabilities, not "for". It's an important distinction. We're working for an accessible and inclusive Canada.

CCD is delighted that the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs is conducting a study about appointing an independent commissioner to organize televised leaders' debates during federal election campaigns. We have, for a number of years, submitted questions to the leaders that we hoped would be included, and they never have been, not once.

Before I start talking about what should happen, what I'd like to talk to you about is the obligations Canada has to make sure that these things happen. Canada has signed on to the Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities. It's been in place for a number of years now. Article 29 is on participation in political and public life, and states:

States Parties shall guarantee to persons with disabilities political rights and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others, and shall undertake:

To ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote and be elected, inter alia, by:

Ensuring that voting procedures, facilities and materials are appropriate, accessible and easy to understand...

Protecting the right of persons with disabilities to vote by secret ballot...

—and get assistance from the people they choose, not somebody else—

Guaranteeing the free expression of the will of persons with disabilities as electors and to this end, where necessary, at their request, allowing assistance in voting...

To promote actively an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs, without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, and encourage their participation in public affairs, including:

Participation in non-governmental organizations and associations...

Forming and joining organizations of persons with disabilities to represent persons with disabilities at international, national, regional and local levels.

In addition, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees equality before and under the law to people with disabilities. The Canadian Human Rights Act guarantees to people with disabilities that they will not experience discrimination in the federal jurisdiction with respect to the provision of goods and services. This includes the right to vote and the right to be a part of the whole voting process, which includes the debates. If those things are not there, it will not come true.

I could talk a lot about some of the things that people have already talked about. I was going to bring up ASL and LSQ interpretation, and I was also going to bring up audio narration during the debates' key visual elements to make sure that people are aware of the non-verbal communication that takes place during a debate. I was going to mention the use of plain language for people who aren't necessarily grasping the language well, and closed captioning so that people who are hard of hearing have access to the debates' information. I'll note that accessibility accommodations should be available in all locations and platforms to ensure participation of citizens with disabilities in the audience and participation of potential candidates who may have disabilities.

In addition, I'd like to talk about how you may become compliant.

If it is determined that an independent commissioner is to be tasked with organizing televised leaders' debates, then he or she will need to ensure full participation is spelled out in whatever legislation authorizes the establishment of the commissioner. There's an obligation to organize debates that are fully accessible to Canadians with disabilities and inclusive of the concerns of people with disabilities so that this component of Canadian elections meets the expectations set out in article 29 of the CRPD.

To ensure that the format of the debates is truly inclusive and accessible, the legislation should require the commissioner, in advance of planning a debate, to consult with the representative organizations of people with disabilities concerning the accessibility and inclusion measures that are needed to ensure compliance with article 29.

Legislation should require that the commissioner establish an advisory committee consisting of individuals appointed by the self-representative organizations of people with disabilities, who will advise on debate questions that are inclusive of the concerns of Canadians with disabilities.

The commissioner should undertake a post-debate evaluation of the accessibility and inclusiveness of the debate, and the commissioner should report to Parliament about the measures that were taken to ensure the accessibility and inclusiveness of the debate and the outcome of the post-debate evaluation.

● (1240)

Thank you for your consideration of the issues of Canadians with disabilities. Only when Canada truly ensures full political participation by Canadians, regardless of ability, will Canada be able to call itself an inclusive country.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you all for your presentations, and also for the work you do every day. We really appreciate it. Canada really appreciates it.

Now we'll go to our seven-minute round, which includes both questions and answers.

Go ahead, Mr. Bittle.

**Mr. Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.):** Thank you so much.

Thank you, everyone, for your presentations. They provide an excellent perspective.

I'll start with you, Ms. Bergeron. Thank you for your comments, and also for giving me some perspective in terms of the next time I go door to door. It's not necessarily just one campaign but 338 campaigns, times all the various parties, so I appreciate that insight.

Specifically on the debate coverage, you mentioned descriptive audio. There have been some public service announcements and commercials about it. Can you describe a bit how that works and where individuals access that service? How would it work for a debate?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Yes, absolutely.

To start, just so you know, the document we handed out earlier is actually not the information you need in the next federal election, but our briefing note, which we will provide to you in English and French afterwards. We didn't want to give it to you in advance, for obvious reasons.

Descriptive video is really a narration that is overdubbed on top of any kind of visual. It doesn't interfere with people speaking, but if somebody is using a video or a picture or if they are using a lot of gestures or signals, that can be fully described. People will say, for instance, this speaker is doing this gesture, or they're showing a picture that shows this image. If it's a video, they will describe what's in the video. That's how it works.

AMI does a lot of this work on their channel. All of their programming has descriptive video. There's other descriptive video on programs on TV as well.

● (1245)

**Mr. Chris Bittle:** Thank you.

You also mentioned screen readers. Can you describe a bit how websites aren't accessible to screen readers?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** A screen reader is a synthesizer that reads, in an electronic voice, what's on the screen to a person who is blind or partially sighted. If the website meets the WCAG standards, WCAG 3 or WCAG 2.0—I'm sorry, I don't know all the numbers in there—the website can be accessible with that. If there are some images there or some videos that are not described, or if they're set up so that the screen reader can't read what's on the screen or sometimes if there's imaging or programming in the background, it stops the voice synthesizer from working. It doesn't allow us to access.

There is also the fact that it's very difficult if you don't have proper colour contrast. I know that a lot of parties like to stick to their colours on the website, and that's understandable. However, sometimes that's not the best contrast for someone with low sight.

**Mr. Chris Bittle:** Okay.

Mr. Folino, you mentioned ASL and closed captioning. Is it important that they exist together, or would one be acceptable? Is it necessary that they both be there for full accessibility?

**Mr. Frank Folino (Interpretation):** The answer is that you require both. Closed captioning is primarily for the hard of hearing community, and anyone with intellectual disabilities can watch the closed captioning. It benefits everyone. Sign language, ASL and LSQ, needs to be there simultaneously as well.

**Mr. Chris Bittle:** I'll go back to my time as a lawyer. When I would read transcripts, it would be very difficult to figure out, when lawyers would talk over each other, what was being said. In a debate format, that often happens. How does ASL or closed captioning deal with that situation, if they can?

**Mr. Frank Folino (Interpretation):** The interpreters can regulate conversation. For example, if you look at the Quebec election platform a few years ago, it was televised, and it had four sign language interpreters simultaneously working, one representing each party. They were neutral, obviously. The interpreters would just interpret the conversation happening back and forth, and it was quite effective. It's available on YouTube if you want to see a sample. That seemed to work very well.

**Mr. Chris Bittle:** I have two minutes. I think this is a question that I've opened up, and I apologize for the lack of time.

Do existing social media platforms do a good job with regard to accessibility issues? How can they be used for a debate, or how can it be improved?

**Mr. James Hicks:** I can try to answer some of that anyway.

I think it depends on what social media platform you're using. If you use one that's primarily visual, my guess is that it does not include any text in the background that people with visual impairments would be able to use. If you're talking about text-based media like Twitter, that probably would not be a problem. People would be able to access it fairly well. I think maybe other people can talk about what it is for them.

It really depends. It's like television. There are certain channels that provide what's needed for people who can't see what's on the screen to understand it. Most of them don't. It's the same with social media. Most of the stuff doesn't.

**Mr. Frank Folino (Interpretation):** I want to clarify. When there is a televised national debate, and there's closed captioning, audio descriptive narratives, and sign language interpreters on the screen, make sure that it's also provided on social media platforms, on Twitter and elsewhere, because sometimes an individual may be out, but the election debate happens that evening, and that individual doesn't only want to have the limited choice of watching it on TV. That individual may want to have that accessibility provided on his or her mobile device in accessing other platforms, so you need to ensure that all of those outlets are accessible.

• (1250)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Bittle.

Now we'll go on to Mr. Richards.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I guess the question I have will be to all of you. However, I'll ask it slightly differently to each of you, so give me a second, and then I'll let you all respond.

Mr. Folino and Mr. Hicks, you both in your opening statements mentioned some very specific examples of concerns with past debates. It wasn't clear in both cases whether that has been something that has been consistently a problem. Have there been debates in the past in which some of those issues have been

addressed or been dealt with so that you or your members were able to properly access debates?

Ms. Bergeron and Mr. Simpson, can you give me some more specifics on some of the concerns that you have specifically seen in debates in the past? Again, have those been consistent issues, or have you seen debates in which some of those things have been addressed?

**Mr. Frank Folino (Interpretation):** Picture-in-picture sign language interpretation has never happened in a political debate. I think it just has to happen once for it to become precedent.

**Mr. James Hicks:** From the perspective of CCD, number one, as we said, is that we have for years sent in questions about disability. They have never been included. There has not been a question about disability on any leaders' debate ever, and it would be nice to see that happen.

I think it's really important that you not look at disability as a separate issue, because it applies to everybody. For instance, if there was a question on violence against women, it should include reference to the concerns of women and girls with disabilities and deaf women and girls in a meaningful way, because they have their own issues around those things.

It's a matter of recognizing that the issues are not always the same, but they need to be addressed. It's a matter of helping people to understand that. If a commissioner is appointed, that commissioner needs to spend time or have an advisory committee from the disability community to understand what questions he or she needs to ask and what supports need to be put in place so that everything is actually made accessible for folks.

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** I would love to answer your question.

The problem is that because the debates are not always accessible, I have no idea what has been missed. I have no idea if a video or an image has been put up in the background or what expressions and body language people are using. I can sometimes infer what a person is expressing based on the debate, but it's not always there, and I often miss that visual piece. I would really like to say that this is what was missed, but I'm never going to be able to tell you, because I don't know. I know there have been things; I just don't know what they are.

We agree with the concept of making sure that the commissioner consults with people with disabilities. We know our needs and we can help to give them that information and we can help them to better understand what types of accommodation need to be in place and also make sure they understand the importance of doing that.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Can I follow up on that, Ms. Bergeron? I can appreciate that you wouldn't know what had been missed. Are you aware of times when you felt the debate was produced in a way that you were getting all the information you needed from the debate, or has that never occurred that you're aware of?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** It has never occurred. I can hear what the person is saying, but if all we needed was to hear what people are saying, why would we need visuals? It is important to remember visuals are there for a reason.

I don't know when it has, and I've never had it happen. I've been to several debates in my community, and I've never once been provided information in Braille or in an electronic format that I could take home and read.

• (1255)

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Thank you.

In addressing these issues, it sounds as if you're all comfortable with the idea of a commission, but would you see that as the only way of being able to address these issues? Could it perhaps be required of the folks who are producing the debates—whether it be a consortium or whether it be the model from the last election when various people chose to have debates—to consult, determine what the needs are, and address them without the need for a commission, or could perhaps the folks who are producing the debates choose to do that without the need for a commission?

What would be your thoughts on that? Is that the only way you could see this being addressed, or are there other ways we could address some of these issues?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** It's not necessarily the only way. I think it's probably the best way, because somebody would be responsible. Either a commissioner or a committee would be in charge of making sure it was in place.

If it wasn't the way the committee would go, I would recommend that you look at making sure there are very good regulations and structures that make sure all the things that all three of us have talked about are done appropriately and in consultation with the community of people who need accommodation.

Do you have anything to add?

**Mr. James Hicks:** You're talking about the leaders' debates, but all kinds of things go on during elections that the same rules apply to, so if debates are going on in other places, it may be necessary to look at an exemption of any costs related to adaptation so that people with disabilities can participate in regular debates in other things. There's a whole bunch of stuff.

Lots of things we've talked about need to be looked at from a broader perspective. If you just talk about the leaders' debates, then it leaves out an awful lot of activity around political life and around the decisions people make. We're not just making decisions about the leaders. It's really important to look at it from an overall perspective. If we can get it right for the leaders, then what sorts of things do we have to put in place for parties to be able to get it right no matter where they are? That may include some regulations around spending money and all those sorts of things. You need to begin to look at those things.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Folino.

**Mr. Frank Folino (Interpretation):** I would just like to add to the recent comments by my colleagues. It's important to have an independent consortium commission or commissioner to consult with and include disability advisory groups, so that regardless of the jurisdiction, the requirements are provided everywhere.

For people with disabilities, we want to involve experts in the discussion about accommodations so that everyone can work

together to provide ongoing advice to the commissioner, or the potential committee. Then they will know what they have to provide during the leaders' debates, and we will be able to provide the appropriate feedback. That will include all of the issues for people with disabilities, and we're certainly there to help and assist in providing a better and more accessible election debate. We want to remove every kind of barrier.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Garrison.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I thank the witnesses for being here today.

I particularly want to thank CNIB for the Braille handout, because I will never look at my election materials the same way again after today. That was a very effective way of reaching me as a politician, so I thank you for that.

I've tried to listen carefully to things you were saying, and I've heard three or four very good ideas. I'm going to tell you what I've heard, and I'm going to ask you to tell me what I've missed and what I've left out from that.

One of the things that was common was that this committee should build a requirement to be fully accessible into the leadership debate arrangements from the beginning. The second is that there should be an advisory committee for people with disabilities, and not just a commitment at the beginning, but ongoing consultation as the debates get developed. A third thing is that multiple platforms for the debates would help make them more accessible, and funding should be available to make sure the accessibility can be accommodated.

Those are the main things I heard from you today. I know that's not everything you had to say, but we need to get the committee to focus on the things that need to be there. I'm going to ask each one of the four of you here today, starting with Mr. Folino and working back across the table, to tell me if those capture what you're trying to say, as well as what I've missed.

• (1300)

**Mr. Frank Folino (Interpretation):** What you've documented is appropriate. I would agree with what you've encapsulated. Thank you.

**Mr. James Hicks:** You've done a really good job at summarizing everything and pulling out the salient points.

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** I agree with the other two speakers about the key points.

There's also the fact of making sure not just that the debate is accessible, but also that the marketing or advertising is accessible, because people need to know when the debate is going to be happening, how the debate is going to be happening, and on what platforms it's going to be happening. If you build it, we will come. If you don't tell us it's built, we will assume it's the same as always: we won't know where to go or how to get there, and we'll assume we're not going to be accommodated.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** Thank you very much for that.

Mr. Simpson, would you comment?

**Mr. Thomas Simpson:** Ditto.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** It has really been very useful to have you here. I've heard from people with disabilities in my riding who say they hear nice words and see nodding, and then later they have to come back and make the same presentation. I hope on the part of this committee that this doesn't happen, but I know that's too often the experience of people with disabilities. Everyone says the nice things and nods the right way, and then nothing actually happens.

I see a lot of nodding around the table, and I hope the committee will take your testimony today very seriously and build it in.

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Descriptive video would have told me that very well. Thank you.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** That's what I was trying to be, descriptive video.

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Yes, well done. You're hired.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We very much appreciate your coming. It's a very new perspective, as some of you said, that hasn't been covered sufficiently in the past, and now we have no excuse for not making sure it's covered in the future, from your excellent testimony.

Thank you very much.

Committee, we have to take a couple of minutes to go in camera for committee business.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

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