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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Good morning, everyone.

Welcome to meeting number 21 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The committee is meeting today to consider the main estimates of the Leaders' Debates Commission. For the first half of the meeting, I would like to welcome Minister LeBlanc and officials from PCO, including Allen Sutherland and Sarah Stinson.

I will remind members that all comments and questions should be made through the chair. The more we can adhere to that, the less I will interrupt. I will also remind members that interpreters have a tough job to do, so if we slow it down a bit, it's easier for them to provide interpretation.

With that, Minister LeBlanc, welcome to the PROC committee. You are the first minister to come here, so please leave the bar in an adequate spot. You have up to five minutes.

Welcome.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities): Madam Chair, I always strive for adequate in my work, so I hope I meet that high standard today.

Madam Chair, thank you for inviting me. Through you to our colleagues, thank you for the work you're doing. I'm pleased to appear before your committee to discuss the main estimates for the Leaders' Debates Commission. I understand the Right Honourable David Johnston will be coming shortly after we finish our time together.

I am joined, as you said, Madam Chair, by Al Sutherland, who's the assistant secretary to the cabinet for machinery of government. It's a very impressive title. In my riding, they think that's like a snowplow, but Al handles the machinery of government, which includes democratic institutions. Sarah Stinson is the director of operations of the democratic institutions secretariat at the Privy Council Office.

Madam Chair, we believe, as I think all members do, that Canadians have many reasons to be proud of our democracy. It's not without challenges, but there are many more reasons that we should celebrate our democracy than be concerned about it. Our institutions and practices reflect our societal values. I think we all agree that we need to protect them as best we collectively can. At the

same time, there are always opportunities to improve and strengthen democratic institutions to better fulfill democracy's promise.

I thank you, Madam Chair, and your colleagues on this committee, for the work that you do on an ongoing basis on these issues.

[Translation]

The leaders' debates play an essential role in federal elections and are the cornerstone of a healthy, dynamic and diverse democracy in Canada.

Since it was created in 2018, the Leaders' Debates Commission, which is independent, has sparked Canadians' interest in two federal elections, in 2019 and in 2021, and provided a platform that enables the public to learn more about the potential prime ministers, the party leaders, and their ideas for the country, and to compare them.

[English]

While the Leaders' Debates Commission receives limited administrative support from the Privy Council Office, it conducts its mandate with complete independence and in the public interest. Led by an independent commissioner and supported by a seven-member advisory board, the Leaders' Debates Commission's mandate is to organize two leaders' debates—one in each official language—for every federal election.

In November 2020, I announced that the Leaders' Debates Commission, originally established to organize debates for the 2019 general election, would remain in place for the subsequent election. As I said, that was last year. The government also reappointed the debates commissioner, the Right Honourable David Johnston, for a four-year term, and I am grateful that he has agreed to stay in this role. We can all benefit from his leadership, his knowledge, his experience and his judgment.

During the 2021 federal election, over 10 million Canadians tuned in to the English language debate and over four million watched the French language debate. They were distributed on 36 television networks, four national radio networks and 115 digital streams. The debates were more accessible than ever, being provided in 16 languages, including six indigenous languages, American sign language and *la langue des signes québécoise*. They were also available with closed captioning and described video.

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

During the months that followed, the Commission conducted an exercise on the lessons learned from its experience in the 2021 debates. That exercise resulted in a report containing carefully thought out recommendations that will help to guide future leaders' debates.

I have received a mandate from the Premier Ministre to examine the report tabled in the House of Commons this week dealing with ways to improve the leaders' debates and take the necessary measures for the debates to continue to serve the public interest.

[*English*]

I would obviously like to thank Commissioner Johnston for his considered and thoughtful assessment, and candid assessment, of the 2021 debates. I had an opportunity to speak with the Right Honourable David Johnston earlier this week. I thanked him personally for the work that he and his colleagues have done. I would welcome your thoughts on the commissioner's report. I know and hope that PROC will be seized of this question and will provide all of us with recommendations on a path forward.

Madam Chair, I know that our time is limited and colleagues may have questions, so let me turn briefly to the main estimates, precisely the purpose of our conversation today and the subject of this appearance.

The main estimates for 2022-23 include an amount of \$454,187 for the Leaders' Debates Commission, which reflects the amount allocated in budget 2021. More specifically, budget 2021 revised the existing two-year pre-election and election year funding profile for the commission to allocate the existing funding over a four-year period—\$500,000 for the first year of an election cycle, \$700,000 for the second, \$700,000 for the pre-election year and \$3.6 million for the election year—to ensure that the commission has sufficient funds to prepare for general elections and obviously be prepared on an ongoing basis in a minority Parliament. These measures will help ensure that the leaders' debates continue to play the role we hope they can in subsequent federal elections.

Madam Chair, that concludes these very exciting opening comments. I'm looking forward to colleagues' questions. If there are technical questions around the estimates, Sarah and Al can provide answers, or else we'd be happy to undertake to get the information, through you, Madam Chair, that colleagues would like.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for your comments.

We will begin the first round of questions, with six minutes for each.

Ms. Block, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Through you, I would like to thank our witnesses for joining us today. Thank you, Minister LeBlanc, for being here, and thank you to your departmental staff. We appreciate the time you're giving to our committee today.

Right off the top, I want to ask a question about the creation of the independent Leaders' Debates Commission. You noted in your opening remarks that it was created in 2018. I'm wondering if you could give us an idea of why it was created. It didn't exist prior. I'm just wondering what motivated the creation of this commission.

• (1110)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, thank you for the question.

I think all of us who were candidates—or interested, at least, if not candidates—in the 2015 election saw a series of debates organized in some cases regionally and in some cases by networks. Various leaders participated in many of them, and some not in all of them. There were obvious questions raised: What were the appropriate eligibility criteria? How did various networks or organizations or universities decide whom to invite?

We thought it would be important to have an independent, thoughtful opportunity. The obvious choice of the Right Honourable David Johnston we think impressed upon Canadians the seriousness of this effort. I think his reputation and independence allowed for a thoughtful discussion of how to organize, in the most accessible way possible, access to leaders' debates.

The basic principle, Madam Chair, to answer our colleague's question, was to ensure the highest degree of accessibility. Networks were able to carry these televised debates. They could be listened to on the radio, as I said. It would offer a neutral platform for the party leaders to be able to connect directly with Canadian voters.

It was an exercise in evolution. There were some things that may have worked well and some that may not have. The commissioner has obviously offered reflections.

That was sort of the basic motivation. Many other democracies—of course, we think of European countries—have similar structures.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much, Minister.

I'll follow up with another question. You defined the relationship between PCO and this commission as the PCO providing “limited administrative support”. Does the PCO provide any funding to the leadership commission? You outlined an amount here. Does that come directly from PCO?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I'll ask Al, because it's a technical question but an important one. I would assume that in the normal estimates process of Parliament and so on, the money comes through the Privy Council Office in the estimates approved by Parliament and the budgetary process.

Al, can you provide a very quick and precise answer to Madam Block?

Mr. Allen Sutherland (Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Machinery of Government and Democratic Institutions, Privy Council Office): Sure.

Madam Chair, the minister is correct.

For any services that PCO provides, the back office services—the administrative services—are one portion of it, but the actual flow of money is as you see in the main estimates. PCO does not provide supplementary funding on top of that. I think that's what you were trying to discern. In fact, the debates commission does pay for any back office support that is provided by PCO. There's a mechanism for doing that.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thanks very much.

Madam Chair, once again, through you, my final question is around the comments you made about the motivation for this commission in wanting to ensure an independent, transparent forum when it came to our leadership debates. I'm wondering if you can tell us how you ensure the independence or the unbiased involvement of your moderators when they are invited to moderate a debate.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, thank you for the question.

That is an essential element, I would argue, of public confidence and credibility in the debates themselves and in the ability of various political leaders to get their message out to Canadians.

Obviously the government does not play a role in those questions about moderators and so on. That's why we thought of the Right Honourable David Johnston as the debates commissioner, with the professional staff that he had assembled to advise him. For example, Michel Cormier, a very senior well-known journalist at Radio-Canada, with a national and international reputation, worked with Commissioner Johnston.

Those questions are critical. The commissioner has reflected in his two reports after those elections on those issues.

I would urge you to have that conversation with him in a few moments, because I think, Madam Chair, that our colleague Madam Block has identified what is for us an essential and fundamental issue: to ensure independence, credibility and integrity from a journalistic perspective of these debates. Mr. Johnston perhaps could add something to what I've said.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

• (1115)

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Mr. Fergus, six minutes go to you, please.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to address my questions and comments to Mr. Leblanc and the two Privy Council Office officials.

First, I'd like to thank you for coming to testify before the committee.

Actually, my question is really for Ms. Stinson or Mr. Sutherland. It concerns the votes in the Main Estimates.

If there were to be no elections in 2022-2023, depending on the situation, would a portion of the proposed votes for the Leaders' Debates Commission remain unused?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: If I may, Madam Chair, I'd like to answer, and Mr. Sutherland or Ms. Stinson can then give details about the votes carried forward.

The goal is to provide for basic operations. This is a minority government and elections could occur at any time. Mr. Fergus, you and I didn't vote in favour of a censure motion, but such a motion could eventually pass. In that case, there would be an early election. I spoke with representatives of the Right Honourable David Johnston, and we decided to provide for basic operations, even if it means bringing it back in the event of an early election.

Mr. Sutherland can answer Mr. Fergus' question about long-term votes.

[*English*]

Mr. Allen Sutherland: Madam Chair, I'll just say that the way the budget is set up is designed to provide flexibility in the event that an election occurs later, or earlier.

As the minister well stated, you have this kind of foundation amount. I believe the commissioner said that he has five staff. Four are part time and one is full time. You have in the funding allocation the \$500,000, which is enough for that amount of resourcing.

Should there be an election that comes earlier, he has access to about \$2.8 million in order to realize and execute the debates. However, it's frozen until such time as it's needed. The intent is to provide the flexibility that the commission needs in the event of an unexpected election, which, as was said, in a minority government is always possible.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Madam Chair, my question is for the Minister.

In your opening remarks, you talked about the origins of the Commission, whose mandate, as everyone knows, is to establish the criteria for participating in the leaders' debates.

Do you think the criteria established in the last election should be changed? If so, how should they be changed?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, that is another essential question.

Following the most recent debates, in 2019 and the fall of 2021, I spoke with the Right Honourable David Johnston. The criteria used for selecting the leaders to participate in the debates are primarily up to the Commission.

A Federal Court decision on accreditation of journalists so they can participate in the press conferences following the debates did spark some controversy, or interest. It is always very delicate. Mr. Fergus has identified the crucial question. It isn't the role of an elected government, which is partisan in the good sense of the word, to choose what journalists will be accredited. That decision is up to the Commissioner.

The Commission established the criteria and released them publicly to Canadians. Those criteria were applied. The criteria changed somewhat between the first debate, in 2019, and the one last year. We are going to rely on the independent judgment of the Commission and the thoughts that Mr. Johnson set out in his reports, but also on the opinions of the committee of experts he consulted and the professionals who considered the question.

In my conversations with Mr. Johnson, I was impressed by the significant effort he made to understand what happens in other large democracies, whether in Europe or in the Americas. That is what the Commissioner and his team drew on. Nonetheless, it is still a subject that will necessarily give rise to controversy.

I'm going to let Mr. Johnson explain the context for us.

• (1120)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Therrien, you have six minutes.

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): I'd like to thank the Minister and his colleagues for being here today.

The Leaders' Debate Commission is independent of the Minister. That means that you don't really have any power, when the Commission makes its decisions in performing its mandate. Is that correct?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Absolutely.

Mr. Alain Therrien: The objective is simple and understandable, and it's to your credit.

Assume that I'm a Liberal minister.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You would be a good one.

Mr. Alain Therrien: That'll never happen.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You wear it well.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Let's say I'm a minister in a Liberal government and I want to set up a commission. With that said, I don't want to be accused of politicizing something that is part of voters' decision-making process in an election campaign.

That's what you did, and it's to your credit. You set up a commission that is independent of the government so the commission doesn't play politics. That's how I understand it.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Absolutely.

Mr. Alain Therrien: What happens when the Commission does play politics?

How do you feel when you observe that the Commission played politics in the English debate? That's what it did. How do you feel?

I'm telling you, the principle of this Commission is to your credit. You created this Commission so it couldn't play politics and so the debates would be as neutral as possible.

But in the English debate, as everyone saw in Quebec especially—in the rest of Canada, honestly, I don't know—is that during the debate, the Commission played politics. The question that was asked by a moderator, who is supposed to be neutral and objective, was so political that I wondered whether even an M.P. or a politician could have gone so far in a question in order to play politics.

Seriously, how do you feel about that?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, obviously I'm aware of our colleague's comments.

It enjoyed imagining him as a Liberal minister. It warmed my heart.

More seriously, Madam Chair, I understand what he's saying. Obviously, we all saw what followed the English debate, in the public domain and in the context of the election campaign, and what it sparked in French Canada. The only point on which I disagree with my friend is that I don't think the Commission played politics. We have every confidence in Mr. Johnston, as in all the other people who took part in those discussions, such as Michel Cormier. Obviously, I didn't take part in those conversations.

It's an important question, that Mr. Johnson may be able to shed some light on. I think his report provides a reasonably frank and honest account. However, despite all the friendship I have for Mr. Therrien, I refuse to believe that the Commission played politics. That is the last thing I would accuse Mr. Johnston of in this context.

• (1125)

Mr. Alain Therrien: I think that raising points for discussion and arguing them, and passing judgment about situations in order to prove that one is right, is playing politics. That is what the moderator did.

Was the Commission playing politics through the moderator?

The Commission should have dissociated itself from what the moderator said, at the very least, and apologized. The moderator and the Commission didn't apologize. The people listening to us should go back and reread the question the moderator asked and ask themselves whether a politician might have talked like that to get votes, to change opinions, or to pass judgment. The answer is plainly yes.

Seeing that, we can't deny that there is an obvious problem. We have created an entity that is supposed to be apolitical and independent of the Minister's powers, which is to the Minister's credit. However, I look at the events that occurred and I think that an alarm has to be sounded. It makes absolutely no sense. We have to hope that the situation will be remedied.

I think you have a role to play in doing that. You can examine what the Commission did and discuss it. You can study the recommendations and make sure they mean that it will not happen again.

I have examined the recommendations carefully and I found nothing that guaranteed that a situation like that couldn't happen again.

Have you tried to sound the alarm and say that these recommendations contain nothing that would prevent this kind of situation happening all over again?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Obviously, as I said, we all noted the post-debate comments and reactions Mr. Therrien is talking about. I have enormous confidence in Mr. Johnston and his team. They gave the matter thought after the 2021 debates as they did in 2019. To allow for better preparation, they intend to appoint a producer for the debates in advance.

[*English*]

In English, it was a producer.

[*Translation*]

I don't want to use the technical word in French, because it isn't accurate.

I think they thought about how to use the format to heighten the visibility of the debates. Personally, I think Canadians wanted to hear the leaders discuss public policy among themselves in the context of an election. At the outset, having that opportunity was a very big priority for me. So the members of the Commission can see whether they agree on that objective and assess whether it was achieved.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Idlout, the floor is yours for six minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): [*Member spoke in Inuktitut*]

[*English*]

I will switch to English. I wanted to share in my language a thank you and a welcome to you on this important meeting.

I think ensuring that Canadians appreciate the position of the leaders is very important. The rest of the MPs who end up being elected follow the leadership very closely, and we want to work well with our leaders. I think these leadership debates are quite important, and I share my colleague's concerns about the last debate.

Before I get to specific questions, I also want to take the opportunity to thank you as the minister for infrastructure, because one of the decisions you made, which I think I had an influence on, was to fund the water crisis in Iqaluit. I'm very thankful for that.

I also want to quickly ask if you agree with recommendation number 7 from the commission. It states that the commission should ensure the debates are available in languages other than

French and English, "paying special attention to Canada's Indigenous languages".

• (1130)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, thank you for the question.

To Madame Idlout, I was also pleased that the government, with the city of Iqaluit and the territorial authorities, was able to address the very urgent crisis of safe, accessible drinking water in her territory's most important and most populous city.

When I met with the mayor, I was concerned about the amount of time that the work would take. It reminded me, and it should remind all Canadians, of the challenges of infrastructure projects in the territory and having access to the supplies, the materials and the workforce. We tend to think in southern Canada that the construction season may extend for many months, but that's not the case in Nunavut.

I'm glad that problem is on its way to being fixed. We have more work to do in that territory on infrastructure projects, and I would look happily on an opportunity to collaborate with the member of Parliament from Nunavut.

On recommendation 7, the government is very pleased that the commission recognized the importance of making these debates—for the reasons that our colleague very properly and I think compellingly described—as accessible and as available to as many Canadians as possible. Obviously, our collective efforts to ensure that indigenous languages are considered in this conversation are critical.

The commission has taken note of the work that this committee has done around the issue of indigenous languages in the context of the electoral process. Anything that the commission can do, in its judgment, to make them as accessible and as available as possible to the greatest number of Canadians is certainly something we would support.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut*]

[*English*]

There were two statements you made that drew my attention.

You mentioned the importance of the societal values and you also talked about the highest degree of accessibility. Those two seem to be quite important, which we need to make sure are monitored and measured. In terms of these debates, it didn't sound like the journalists and the moderator shared these same values. How would you ensure, if there is to be another commission—or even without one—that the journalists and the moderators are sharing societal values and not excluding certain perspectives, such as ensuring indigenous languages during debates?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, again through you, thank you for the question.

When I spoke of societal values, I thought that those would be... Certainly, for those of us around this table who are lucky enough to be the elected representatives of our communities, those societal values include things like an open, accessible, fair and free democracy. That is something that I know everybody who is honoured enough to sit in Canada's House of Commons aspires to.

Our democracy, like all democracies around the world, is not without challenges. However, as I think our colleague has correctly said, the ability of as many Canadians as possible to participate constructively in an informed and thoughtful way in the policy debates that should—and, in our view, do—form the basis of a national election campaign requires that they be available in as many languages as possible. One of the great strengths of our country is the many languages spoken on this land. In many cases, the longest-standing voices heard on our land are those of Inuit people and other indigenous peoples.

For me, it's absolutely important that the commission continues to examine that. We have every confidence that Commissioner Johnston and his staff will ensure the independence of the moderator and the producers and ensure that these factors are also part of that conversation.

The Chair: Thank you for that great exchange.

We will now move on to five minutes for Mr. Steinley, followed by five minutes for Mr. Turnbull.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

I will give Mr. Therrien the floor next, and then Ms. Idlout. They will each have two and a half minutes.

You have the floor, Mr. Steinley.

[*English*]

Mr. Warren Steinley (Regina—Lewvan, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here.

I have a couple of questions around the cost and the reasoning for the debates commission.

First of all, I want to make sure I have my numbers right, Minister LeBlanc. You said half a million dollars for this year, and then \$700,000 and \$700,000, and if there is an election year in 2024-25, \$3.6 million.

Is that right on for the numbers that you gave us?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Yes. My information, Madam Chair, would be that budget 2021 made those allocations. However, as Mr. Sutherland explained, there is some flexibility in the context.

Mr. Warren Steinley: Excellent.

Mr. Sutherland made the comment that during a minority Parliament, you always have to be ready, so money had to be allocated. However, right now, after your backroom deal, there isn't much of a minority parliament; there's an NDP-Liberal majority government.

Does that money still have to be on the table? You made the deal that there won't be an election until 2024-25. What would that money be used for now?

You said that in a minority, you have to be ready, but now there shouldn't be an election until 2024-25, so what would that approximately \$5.2 million be needed for, heading into the election in 2024-25?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, it won't surprise you that I disagree with our colleague's characterization of a Liberal-NDP majority government. I left the television on until the broadcast finished on election night and was very disappointed that it wasn't a Liberal majority government. Characterizing something as a “backroom deal” that's posted on the Internet and announced by two national political leaders in front of a large media contingent doesn't strike me as a secret backroom deal. It strikes me as—

Mr. Warren Steinley: Madam Chair, there is a deal. If there isn't going to be an election until 2024-25—

The Chair: Okay. I'm going to—

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.): I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

Madam Chair, the standing rules are that the witness has a relatively equal amount of time to answer the question without interruption, so I'd ask that Mr. Steinley control his emotions and allow the minister to finish answering his question.

Mr. Warren Steinley: I can move on.

The Chair: I'm going to suspend for a quick second.

We on this committee do a very good job. We always have done and we will continue to. That is the goal. I know that the people who are members of this committee are here for the right reasons. I know we can continue to do this work and we are going to continue to do that work.

Can we put the train back on the tracks and remember why we're here? Let's get it done.

I paused the clock. Are we all good?

An hon. member: Yes.

The Chair: We will resume the meeting.

I'm going to go back to Mr. Steinley, and then I will make sure Mr. LeBlanc has adequate time.

Mr. Warren Steinley: Madam Chair, I ask the question to Minister LeBlanc through you: Does he believe that \$5.2 million is the best use of taxpayers' money when, prior to this, in the elections of 2011 and 2015, there were other groups willing to put on leadership debates that didn't cost the taxpayers a dime?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, the answer would be yes. Democracy is everyone's business. Private institutions, private networks and interest groups that organize debates, in our view, don't have the public confidence and independence that a commission has, led by somebody with the national and international reputation of the Right Honourable David Johnston.

That's why we think that it's absolutely an appropriate role for an independent Leaders' Debates Commission.

• (1140)

Mr. Warren Steinley: Thank you for that, Minister, but as our fellow committee members have just said, this was, with those moderators, probably one of the most biased leadership debates that we've seen in our country.

If he's talking about independence and democracy, how could it be that this debate, which was put on with taxpayers' dollars, was one of the most biased debates Canadians have seen in the history of our country?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, it won't surprise you that I don't share the pessimism or the alarmist nature of our colleague. We think that any debate is, by necessity, a vigorous exchange of ideas and a thoughtful presentation by women and men who seek to serve the country in national leadership capacities in a general election. We do not view that as a negative. We view that as a constructive and thoughtful process.

If colleagues had specific questions around moderator X, producer Y or journalist Z, obviously, I think.... I don't want to turn around, because it would be rude, Madam Chair, but I believe behind me, anxiously waiting to perhaps answer those questions, would be Mr. Johnston himself, or people with as stellar a reputation as Michel Cormier, a fellow Acadian.

Mr. Warren Steinley: I want to make sure that the minister thinks and believes that \$5.2 million was worth it to put on a leadership debate when there were other interest groups, other people, who were going to put on this debate. He thinks right now, at a time when taxpayer dollars are stretched to the limit, that this \$5.2 million was worth it and that Canadians would share that view with this minister right now.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: The short answer is yes. Canadians in the two general elections when this debate commission existed re-elected Liberal governments. We view that as a reasonably comfortable endorsement of this thoughtful and independent process. People should reflect before they ascribe anything other than the highest merit to a commission led by such an outstanding Canadian as the Right Honourable David Johnston.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Mr. Turnbull, you have five minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thanks, through you, to the minister and his team for being here. It's great to have you and to see you, as always. We really appreciate your time today.

Something that we've talked about quite a bit in this committee that has come up multiple times, and certainly I've brought it up, is the general feeling that there's quite a lot of vitriol and a rise in hatred. Disinformation can certainly be stoked sometimes by this feigned outrage that we hear coming from the opposition at times.

In general, I have concerns about the erosion of our public debate and discourse, especially during elections. What's interesting is that when I hear the minister speak, I hear words like “public confidence”, “credibility”, “independence” and “integrity”. The other word that comes to my mind is “trust”.

In the turbulent times that we're in, and seeing the public debate out there, “turbulent” is a good word to describe it. The leaders' debate actually stands in contrast to that. It takes on an even higher significance and perhaps an important role in preserving and modelling the type of discourse that we want. The minister used words like “informed” and “thoughtful”.

That really stands in contrast to some of the other things we're seeing. We heard from Mr. Perrault about the increased incidence of violence and threats that MPs and even Elections Canada staff and volunteers, who participated in helping with our democratic process, were experiencing. It sort of breaks my heart. How can we ensure that the leaders' debate really preserves that level of public trust and promotes it in our discourse? I think that's becoming more and more important.

In particular, I would welcome any remarks on the general format, which we did hear some concerns about in connection with the last English debate.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, thank you for the question.

I think our colleague Mr. Turnbull answered much more eloquently than I did the previous question from our Conservative colleague around the importance of having this independent, publicly funded organization to provide exactly—as I think Mr. Turnbull described in a very eloquent way, Madam Chair—that opportunity for Canadians.

I don't disagree at all with some of the challenges. I think Mr. Turnbull used the word “turbulent” to describe challenges in our democracy, as in other democracies around the world. Like many people around the world, we're obviously concerned about some of the turbulence we saw in a presidential election in the context of our southern neighbour, the United States. Around the world, Madam Chair, these circumstances are increasing.

I too had a conversation with Monsieur Perrault, and again I share Mr. Turnbull's analysis around the increase of disinformation and threats and the intimidation of electoral people who work, very modestly remunerated—many of them volunteers—to help organize the elections. Those are ongoing challenges. I know that this committee will have some thoughtful reflections on how we can work together to strengthen those institutions, but the Leaders' Debates Commission, in our view, as I think Mr. Turnbull enunciated, is a critical part of that democratic infrastructure to ensure fair, accessible, open and transparent access.

That doesn't mean it's not without its own turbulence as well. Again, we've taken note of public and political comments around specific individuals who participated in some of those debates. Perhaps Mr. Johnston or his colleagues will have specific reflections on those individuals or how those persons were selected and what improvements might be made in the process in order to ensure that perhaps that doesn't happen, but I don't think we'll ever have a nationally televised broadcast leaders' debate in a vigorous election campaign in a country like Canada that doesn't generate controversy.

Some leaders will think they should have done better or wish they had done better. Some will think they did very well. The next day, the commentary will perhaps disagree with their own self-analysis. All of that is a normal part of this discourse, and that's why it's important to have it in the hands of independent, thoughtful people, which removes the idea that interest groups or private sector organizations are perhaps setting up these conversations.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Therrien, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Everyone agrees that a serious mistake was made. Even the other party leaders reacted when it happened. My leader reacted immediately and the others reacted afterward.

But I'm not persuaded by the recommendations made.

The independence you have from the Commission is a good thing, in my opinion, and I have told you that. However, you saw that a serious mistake was made. The turbulence observed in our debates wasn't caused by politicians, as was the case in other countries; it was caused by the moderator. It has to be done. It doesn't just happen.

If the recommendations aren't enough, as I believe, and this kind of situation happens again, what will the Minister's reaction be then? What will he be able to do?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I agree with what Mr. Therrien has said. All the party leaders, including his, expressed major concerns about the question asked by the moderator and the way she conducted the English leaders' debate.

As an elected member of the House of Commons—obviously I'm not speaking for the Commission—I would have preferred there not to have been this kind of controversy. The situation was not particularly constructive and it left a bad impression. On that, I think I share the feelings expressed by Mr. Therrien's leader at the time.

However, that may be a role your committee should play, Madam Chair. You're going to be hearing Mr. Johnston and you will be able to read his report. The government is eager to see what the committee's recommendations and suggestions will be. If it decides to propose an adapted and improved structure in response to your recommendations, they will obviously be taken into consideration.

• (1150)

Mr. Alain Therrien: I'm pleased to have been invited to work on this question, because there is work to be done, in my opinion. It isn't over.

However, the recommendations I've read in no way convince me that we are safe from another equally catastrophic situation, and I use the word "catastrophic" intentionally.

An entire people was actually accused of using its laws to discriminate against a segment of the population, and that is totally un-

acceptable. I would remind you that the National Assembly unanimously denounced that notorious question.

Personally, I hope it will not happen again. Quebeckers deserve better than that.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Ms. Idlout, you have two and half minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik, iksivautaq.*

From my understanding, there were a lot of huge issues with the format and with the moderator in that it seemed to have become a platform for journalists. It seemed that in fact Canadians did not get a good sense of what the leaders' platforms were.

If there is going to be that sense of independence that is needed, how can there be assurance about those kinds of feedback about the moderator and that this is not a platform for journalists but is actually a leaders' debate that allows Canadians to learn who the leaders actually are?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, thank you for the question.

It won't surprise you that I obviously agree with the way Madame Idlout described the importance of Canadians being able to take note of the leaders' platforms and of the differences in views on issues that are important to them.

In the context of a general election, it is precisely that interaction between the leaders—the differences in views and of policies—that should be the most important result of one of these leaders' debates. It should not be a platform for anything other than facilitating, to the greatest extent possible, Canadians' understanding of leaders' platforms and of the values of their parties.

It's a contact sport. A national leaders televised debate is necessarily a critical moment in a national election campaign. As I said, our confidence in Mr. Johnston and his colleagues is very high. Done properly, it should offer Canadians that exact opportunity. We're confident that this is a work in progress and that we can all collectively find the best way forward.

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik, iksivautaq.*

I have just one very quick question. What is the appetite to ensure that moderators of debates are indigenous?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Obviously, Madam Chair, our government—and I think all Parliamentarians—have sought ways for Canadians to understand the contribution of indigenous peoples in every part of our society. I am obviously very proud of the Governor General that we chose to represent Canadians.

In the commission's judgment, as they reflect with their group of expert advisers and their independent advisory board, Mr. Johnston and his colleagues can speak to the appropriate structure, Madam Chair, but if this committee offers it to future commissions, that's exactly the kind of suggestion that I hope and believe would have an opportunity to be taken into consideration as they independently make these decisions.

The Chair: Thank you, committee members.

A special thank you goes to our minister, Mr. Sutherland and Ms. Stinson for joining us today.

With that, you are excused to proceed with the rest of your day. I'm sure there will be plenty of questions and plenty of opportunities for us to continue the conversation. Please keep well and safe.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madame Chair, thank you, and thank you to our colleagues.

I look forward to perhaps having an opportunity to appear again with your committee on legislation or other issues that the Prime Minister has confided to me. I was a member of this committee and enjoyed the many hours I spent on the issues that you study.

I thank you for inviting me this morning.

• (1155)

The Chair: Excellent.

We will suspend while we switch panels. Thank you.

• (1155)

(Pause)

• (1155)

The Chair: We will resume the meeting.

For the second part of our meeting, we have the Right Honourable David Johnston, the commissioner of the Leaders' Debates Commission, and his officials.

I will just declare that Mr. Johnston was my University of Waterloo president. His signature is on my paper. I want to put that out in the public forum: There is a bias towards Waterloo people.

Right Honourable David Johnston and officials, welcome to the PROC committee. The floor is yours.

The Right Hon. David Johnston (Commissioner, Leaders' Debates Commission): Thank you so much, Madam Chair. What a delight it is to be here with you.

I'm joined by my colleague Michel Cormier, executive director of the commission.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

With me also is Chantal Ouimet, the Commission's Director of Communications and Public Relations. We are very lucky to have the team here, with [*inaudible*] behind, who is a star.

[*English*]

Thank you so much for inviting the Leaders' Debates Commission to review our main estimates. The commission is seeking a total of \$454,000 in funding for the 2022-23 fiscal year.

[*Translation*]

You've asked us here today to discuss how the Commission is meeting its mandate and performing its role within its current funding arrangements, and to discuss the future plans and activities of the Commission.

[*English*]

After the 2021 experience, which drew significant stakeholder criticism, we carefully assessed positive and negative lessons learned and whether the LDC's continued existence is necessary. I will spend the next few minutes summarizing our 2021 report. We very much look forward to your advice. This is an iterative process. We learn as we go. We have much to gain from your assessment of the significance of debates in our society.

We have broken our mandate down into four questions.

First, were the debates accessible and widely distributed? More than 14 million Canadians watched the debates. The debates were available live on 36 TV stations, four radio networks and 115 digital streams with the emergence of digital. The debates were provided in 16 languages, plus accessible formats.

[*Translation*]

Second, were debate invitations issued on the basis of clear, open, and transparent participation criteria?

In 2021, the Commission set participation criteria and made them public in advance of the election. We also made public the rationale for how it would apply the criteria, as well as its decision on which party leaders met the criteria to be invited.

[*English*]

Third, were the debates effective, informative and compelling? There was widespread agreement that the 2021 debates did not deliver as well as they should have. The two major weaknesses identified were format and moderation. Stakeholders criticized the format as cluttered, restrictive and not allowing leaders enough time to engage in meaningful exchanges.

Fourth, were the debates organized to serve the public interest? We believe changes need to be made in the future to better serve the public interest.

Our 2021 report outlines our recommendations in detail, and here are some very brief highlights: The commission should have final approval over the format and should work with stakeholders between elections to develop a simplified format that best serves Canadians. The commission should select the debate moderator based on expert consultation; maintain sufficient permanent capacity between elections to ensure it can organize debates at short notice and, more generally, to cultivate relationships between elections to foster discussion both in Canada and other countries; and be headed by a debates commissioner whose appointment process involves consultation with the registered political parties represented in the House of Commons.

The commission should ultimately be established through legislation or similar mechanisms, in our view, with a periodic review process, such as every five years, in order to prioritize greater continuity, transparency and access to resources. Its institutional make-up should prioritize real and perceived operational independence, cost-effectiveness and administrative agility.

[Translation]

Over the next 12 months, we will be working to ensure the debates best serve the public interest. We intend to: consult with debate organizers internationally and in Canada on best practices related to format and moderation; write and issue a request for proposal to select the debate producer, and enable the Commission and the producer to start work between elections; and research and test debate formats.

• (1205)

[English]

If given the mandate to select the moderator, we will consult widely with experts to develop a transparent selection process; a detailed set of qualifications for the moderator, including capability, experience and political neutrality; and a due diligence process to ensure that the attributes in qualities being looked for by the commission are verified. We intend to work quite collaboratively with the debates producer.

Let me return to the \$454,000 in funding that is being sought. Cost-effectiveness is fundamental. I have a Scottish heritage.

In our first mandate in 2019, we received \$5.5 million and spent approximately \$3.9 million. In our second mandate, 2021-22, we spent approximately \$3.5 million.

[Translation]

We are a small secretariat, with only one full-time staff member and three part-time staff. We believe debates are important, but we also believe that they can be produced and organized with full regard for administrative efficiency and value for money. If it is decided that the Commission should become a more permanent structure, we will continue to operate with that as one of our core principles.

I am now prepared to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you for your comments.

We will start with a six-minute round.

The first person to have the floor will be Ms. Gladu, who will be followed by Mr. Turnbull, Mr. Therrien and Ms. Idlout.

Ms. Gladu, the floor is yours.

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing.

My first question has to do with one of the parts of the estimate. We've heard that, with the NDP committing to support the Liberals through to 2025, we don't expect to have an election before then.

When we look at the professional and special services of \$203,652 in every year that there's not an election, what is that money being spent to do?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: That would include some of the research capacity we bring on and the consultation we do. It would include the continuation of our information technology set-up and using our website, in particular, to broadly develop what it is we're working on and what the best practices are for debates, etc. It would include some degree of professional advice. I'm a lawyer, and lawyers, alas, are expensive, particularly when you get into litigious matters.

Michel, why don't you comment in more particularity on that expenditure category?

Mr. Michel Cormier (Executive Director, Leaders' Debates Commission): We expect to continue to do the work and continue to evaluate what the best debate practices are, not just here but abroad. We're already in contact with debates producers in other countries, because there are a lot of elections this year. We want to make sure we gather the best expertise possible on issues like moderation, format, distribution and reach, to make sure the next debates are even more successful than the last ones. That's what the—

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Very good.

With respect to the moderators, are they paid a fee or a stipend? If so, can you give us an idea of how much that is?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Can you ask the question again? How much it is for the...?

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Do you pay the moderators a stipend or a fee to moderate? How much is it?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Go ahead, Chantal.

Ms. Chantal Ouimet (Director of Communications, Leaders' Debates Commission): It's part of the production budget.

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Let me come back to the earlier question, which is a very important one.

One of the exercises we will do is work during that period with the request for the debates producer and team and not leave that to the actual election period. In working with that chosen debates production team, we have the necessary consultation, particularly with respect to format and particularly with respect to the qualities of the moderator.

In doing that, we really develop our reach into the broader scholarly community in and around what makes for the best debates, why they're essential in our democratic process and how we can do better in Canada. There's a wide body of knowledge there that we have been tapping into, and we have found it enormously helpful. I think there—

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: It's in the production specialists budget.

• (1210)

The Right Hon. David Johnston: It's specifically production, yes.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Do we know how many moderators you've had? I'm trying to get an idea of what they get to do in a debate.

The Right Hon. David Johnston: That comes within the purview, as Chantal has said, of the allocation we make to the debates production team to carry out the debate. What we have funded is looking at traditionally what the debates production team, usually led by CBC/Radio-Canada, does as traditional debates, and then we're prepared to pay for what is necessary going forward to accomplish broader objectives.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you. That doesn't really tell me how much, but anyway, I'll move on.

In terms of the format, what feedback have you received? What changes would you make in the length of questions, or what other changes would you make to enhance the debates?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: That's really a very important question.

This has been an iterative process. In the two exercises we've had, we have gotten greater familiarity with what makes for the best public interest in debates.

The debates production team had the responsibility for choosing the moderator and, largely, the responsibility for the format. Coming out of the 2021 debate, the change that we are proposing is that the commission should have the ultimate responsibility for both the format and the choice of moderator. From our studies around other jurisdictions and at home, the role of the moderator is really very essential in terms of the quality of the debate.

Let me develop that a little bit, because it's important to understand the different components of this and who should be responsible for what. We are proposing that the debates commission has ultimate responsibility for the format. That involves the forum, the town hall and whether the debate is open or not to audiences; the number of segments and determination of segments; opening and closing statements; participation from audience, panellists or guests; video packages, etc.

Another component is the timing: the length of the debate, the length of each segment, how long each leader has to answer a question, how much time should be devoted to each theme, the length of

open debate sections and the number of questions posed to each leader, but not the themes or topics of the questions. It's very interesting that in the 2008 debates there were eight questions, and in the 2021 debate there were 45, which is a very different style altogether.

We're recommending that the commission have ultimate responsibility for the moderation, which heretofore has been in the hands of the debate producer. The role of the moderator refers to any person on the stage, including journalists, asking questions. The moderator must steer or chair the debate, keep track of timing and engage with leaders by posing questions and following up with questions to the leaders.

For greater clarity, a journalist who's on the stage engaging with leaders, asking them questions and follow-up questions, is, for that period of time, a de facto moderator. A member of the public who's seated in the audience or live, etc., is not.

Then we come to a very important category—there's a fair amount of controversy about this—and that is editorial. The editorial components of the debate include the themes and questions to the leaders, including determining those themes and questions, the order of the themes and questions and indeed the specific wording of each question. Essentially, editorial control is what the leaders are talking about—the themes and the questions they're being asked. Moderation is who asks these questions; format is how the mechanics of the debate unfold. Where are the logistics—

The Chair: Thank you.

The Right Hon. David Johnston: We're suggesting that the final choice for moderation should be the commission.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: That was excellent; thank you.

I will pass it over to Mr. Turnbull now for five minutes.

This is a reminder that we are here to talk about the estimates, and our time is very limited.

Mr. Turnbull, it's over to you.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the Right Honourable David Johnston for being with us today and to the other members of your team at the Leaders' Debates Commission for being here. We really appreciate your time and all the work you do.

It's clear from your opening remarks that you delivered on the vast majority of your mandate, although certainly we can all recognize that there are some improvements that can be made. I appreciated your report and your opening remarks because you've been quite candid about the areas where there's been some feedback about where the debate could be improved significantly.

You made it very clear that the areas are the format and the moderation, and you've provided a list of suggested solutions. For me and many others, we viewed or even called this particular debate—I'm referring to the English debate in the last election—as more of a journalists' showdown. I think that's how it felt for people.

Minister LeBlanc, when he was here earlier, said it's really about what informs the public discourse the best. What information does the public really want to get out of the leaders' debate?

We all know that it's a high-intensity moment. It's a high-pressure moment for a general election, and there's a lot riding on it, so I think it's really important that we work to get it right.

I wondered if anybody had worked back from what the public... If we took the average citizen and asked what they really wanted to get out of the debate, how do we preserve that within the format? Certainly the format really impacts on what they get out of it.

I've heard stories of people who turned the channel; they didn't watch the debate. They started to watch it and were turned off quite quickly. That was very disappointing to me as someone running in the election, of course.

I'll pose that question through you, Madam Chair. I would welcome any remarks you have.

• (1215)

The Right Hon. David Johnston: That's such an important question. We've consulted a lot on that, and we've tried to capture some of that consultation in our report. In particular, the widespread work of the Canadian elections study group, led by the University of Toronto but with people across the country, tried to answer that question and others, and their work is reflected in changes we're suggesting for the next iteration.

Number one, the public wants to understand the policy positions and the platforms of the parties as clearly and in as much depth as they possibly can through the election campaign, but particularly through the debates. Number two, they want to get a sense of who the leaders are. What kind of leaders are they going to be? What do they stand for? What are their values? What are their abilities to take the positions of their party and lead them into concrete action? I think those two are essential.

It's interesting to me that in these consultations, people said that in listening to the debates, they were not interested in entertainment and not particularly focused on the knockout blow that entertainment often provides, but were interested in seriousness, thoughtfulness and probing that would permit a citizen to engage more thoughtfully in exercising his or her vote.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you for that response. It was really great, and that's what I was hoping to hear.

Working from that, and looking at the debate format, could there be more time, in general, for the debate? Could it be a bit longer? Could there be a different arrangement?

Certainly there's been a suggestion that maybe there should be fewer questions. It certainly felt like there were many good journalistic questions that came forward in that last debate. With some exception, I was impressed by the questions, but that was sort of what most people were left with. There were great questions, but almost no contrast of answers from political parties. Certainly fewer questions would leave more time for responses. Anyway, maybe I'll leave that for the moment. That's more of a comment.

In some of your suggestions, you've talked about looking for individuals who have neutrality. I wonder how, within a selection process, you can really ensure that you get a moderator who has political neutrality.

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Really, that's quite fundamental. As you can see, we've spent a fair amount of time in our report trying to understand that. What are the qualities of the best kind of moderator? Of particular interest, the experiences of other jurisdictions are very helpful, underlining the importance of that individual, both in forming the questions and then dealing with them with the leaders.

It's very clear that the best moderator is one who is sort of invisible. This is an opportunity for the leaders to present their views, their characteristics, and so on, and the moderator should be a facilitator of that. One of our expert advisers said that moderators should be like referees in a match of some kind, not playing on the field but invisible, ensuring that the rules are followed in the time permitted, etc.

Their experience is really important, particularly their credibility with the parties themselves, as well as integrity and trust. It should be someone who's not making a career out of this particular appearance, but sees himself or herself as a facilitator on stage, kind of like a *chef d'orchestre* who doesn't play any instruments but ensures that the various sections function in some kind of harmony. Perhaps sweet music is not the best analogy for debate, but that's the kind of thing.

I should add that one of the reasons we think it's important that the debates commission continue during the non-election periods is to do thoughtful work on that, and collect the best experience from around the world. What makes for good moderation? What makes for good formats, and so on? Present that in Canada, and put Canada in a position where we really do have a good understanding of how debates work well in an election process.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you. One day debates will sound like an orchestra. I can't wait.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Therrien, you have six minutes.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to welcome our colleagues who have come to meet with us. I am pleased to be asking them questions. I have a lot of questions to ask. Although I can't require it, I would be happy if you would make your answers as short and precise as possible.

If we say the English debate was a fiasco, I don't think any more needs to be said. I could have pulled out articles from serious newspapers, but we won't play that game today. I think there is consensus on the subject. Even my colleagues in the other parties agree. There were too many questions and not enough debate. There were also too many journalists. The emphasis was put on the journalists rather than the politicians, when it should have been the other way around.

I'm going to come back to the form of the debate. I'd like to know who proposed it to you, how you came to authorize it, and then how things proceeded.

The Right Hon. David Johnston: That is a key question. Fundamentally, it's a question of the moderators. We had determined that it was very important for the Commission to have final responsibility for choosing the moderators. That meant holding broad consultations. Journalistic independence was then considered in the case of those individuals.

Mr. Alain Therrien: How is what you're telling me different from the first recommendation?

I want to understand what you did and what change the first recommendation makes. My approach is truly constructive. Everyone knows we are very constructive here.

Madam Chair, we're going to start patting ourselves on the back.

We want to find solutions. A problem arose and I'd like to know how it can be solved.

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Mr. Cormier, do you want to answer that question?

Mr. Michel Cormier: Under the previous mandate, we asked the producer to propose a format in the invitation to bid. We could accept it or reject it, but we had no influence in terms of modifying it. What we are now proposing is to work between elections with a producer who has been chosen earlier than a few months before the election. We would then have time to develop a simpler format with those people and with the help of expertise from various quarters. What we want to do is make sure the debates best serve the public interest.

Mr. Alain Therrien: That's very clear.

Mr. Michel Cormier: Was my answer short enough?

Mr. Alain Therrien: Yes. That's very good.

Earlier, an analogy was given relating to referees. The Minister said that a debate was like a hockey game. That includes body checking. In 2021, that is what we witnessed. During the debate, the players engaged in body checking, and then the referee ran onto the ice and body checked one of the players. I would even say it was done illegally. The referee lifted an elbow up and struck a blow right in the teeth.

When a referee in a hockey game strikes that kind of blow against a player, what impression does that give you? It's not very nice, is it?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: It's an interesting comparison.

Mr. Alain Therrien: You aren't obliged to respond to these comments, even if it makes me laugh. That's what we saw.

I'm now going to move on to the second recommendation. As we know, the moderator made a serious mistake. She lacked objectivity and neutrality. Everyone agrees. She should not be the moderator again, as everyone also agrees. With that said, how can we avoid the problem being repeated?

I'd like to hear you say that the second recommendation is going to enable us to avoid this kind of problem in the future.

The Chair: Mr. Therrien, I don't want to interrupt you, but I'd remind you that you need to address all your comments to the chair.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I'm sorry. You're right.

The Chair: Go ahead. Thank you.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Madam Chair, I'd like to get an explanation about the second recommendation.

The Right Hon. David Johnston: That's a key question. It's why we decided we should focus our efforts on making sure, in choosing the moderators, that they have certain very important qualities.

• (1225)

Mr. Alain Therrien: Madam Chair, what is the difference between the two?

I'm addressing you, but you aren't even listening to me.

What is the difference between what was done and what will be done, following on the second recommendation? I'm not seeing where the difference lies.

Earlier, Mr. Cormier, you were very clear, but now I'm having more trouble following you.

Mr. Michel Cormier: Before, the Commission was not involved in choosing the moderators. What we're proposing now is that the Commission be ultimately responsible for choosing the moderator, but that this not be some sort of invasion into its mandate.

We want to work with the producers that are chosen, but also with experts. We are already in contact with people from around the world to address these issues. As you see, we have started by establishing a preliminary list of the attributes that we think are important for a moderator to have. They have to know the party leaders relatively well, they have to understand the issues in the election, they have to have the respect and trust of the party leaders, and they have to facilitate debate.

We're trying to offer solutions in response to the criticism we got in the last debate. The important thing is for us to work together to establish the best attributes for the moderators, and then choose moderators based on the criteria established.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I have a suggestion to make. I believe Mr. Cormier was a journalist.

Mr. Michel Cormier: Yes.

Mr. Alain Therrien: There is a code of ethics for journalists and you have to obey it. But the moderator engaged in disinformation and passed judgment on a bill introduced in Quebec. Under her code of ethics, a journalist can't do that. Am I right?

I'd like you to answer yes or no.

Mr. Michel Cormier: Listen, right now, we're trying to determine how we can move forward and make sure there won't be any problems.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Yes, I agree.

I would have liked to address this subject in closing. Could you deduct 30 seconds from my next turn? I'm good at math.

The Chair: I'll deduct that time...

Mr. Alain Therrien: I want to know whether it would be a good idea for the moderator to be a journalist. That person would then have to obey the code of ethics that prevents this kind of mistake being made.

That's my question.

The Chair: So you want me to deduct that time from your second round of questions.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Yes, absolutely.

The Chair: Let's continue.

Mr. Michel Cormier: [*Technical difficulties*] that differs from one kind of media to another, but generally, yes, there are codes of ethics. Ms. Kurl is not a journalist, but that is part of the questions and discussions we'll be having, especially with the producer, to make sure the choice of moderator complies with the list of criteria established relating to the qualities of a moderator.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you.

Mr. Michel Cormier: You're welcome.

The Chair: So I'm going to deduct one minute from Mr. Therrien's next turn.

Ms. Idlout, the floor is yours for six minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik, iksivautaq.*

Thank you so much to the witnesses and to the Right Honourable David Johnston.

I want to thank you particularly for your time as Governor General. I really enjoyed your service and how you highlighted hockey. As a hockey player myself, you really inspired me to continue to want to play, even as I got older, so I thank you for that.

I want to ask about the report. Throughout the whole report, the word "stakeholders" is used quite often. I've looked at appendix 3. There's quite a long list of stakeholders here. There are seven groups of different stakeholders.

I think political parties are particularly important as stakeholders. When you're referencing recommendations made by stakeholders, can you describe to us how much of the political parties' engagement would agree with some of those recommendations, based on what you've heard? The sense that I get from the parties is that they didn't feel heard by the commission. What did you do to make sure they felt heard?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Thank you, Madam Chair, and through you to the member.

We worked very hard at consultation generally with stakeholders, and in particular with political parties or people who had political experience. Our advisory board, made up of seven people, was mandated to choose people who reflected the diversity of the country and gender neutrality, but in particular individuals who had direct political experience. Three of those—John Manley, Deborah Grey and Megan Leslie—have had long-standing experience in this body. The other four were people who also certainly had interest in, and some experience in, political activity, etc. We profited greatly from that.

Second, we undertook quite direct consultations with each of the parties—the party leaders or the party association presidents—on a number of questions, including who should be on the debate stage. We continued that consultation both before and after the debates.

Our own sense in those discussions with the parties was that they were actually quite satisfied with the degree of consultation. The findings of the Canadian election studies group was that there was a good rapport with the parties. We were careful not to simply take their suggestions and say "That's it" to one or the other. We carefully filtered them through others.

It was by no means perfect, and one can improve on it, but I think our sense was that the rapport with the parties was certainly substantially more involved in the fundamental issues than had been the case when a commission was not present to do that. The negotiations between the parties and the debates producers sometimes produced results that were not as good, including the failure to have an English debate in 2015.

● (1230)

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik.*

I also want to ask about the funds, and specifically the area called "Contract for incremental costs for debate production". I do see that there had been an RFP for a debate production and that reimbursements needed to be made. I wondered how that contracting procedure worked.

Given the kind of feedback you have received, it seemed that some of the contract obligations may not have been met, leading to some of the recommendations that are made by the commission to make improvements so that, for example, the moderators and the journalists aren't just promoting themselves and that this is actually a public process to ensure that more Canadians learn about who the leaders actually are.

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Madam Chair, through you to the member, there are two questions there, really.

One is on the specifics of contracts. I'm not aware of any criticism of any of those contracts and their allocation. We try to be very careful to abide by all Treasury Board rules. I have not heard of any specific criticism about those, so I think we feel confident that those are more than simply in order but fulfill all of the requirements you would expect.

There are a few that are still incomplete. The debates production group still have one or two items that will be presented to us, but that will be within their overall contract.

I think with respect to the other question of reach, maybe you can just state it again so I get it very clearly.

Ms. Lori Idlout: The feedback, for example, is that there were huge issues with the format and with the moderator, in that it seemed that the journalists were raising their own platforms as opposed to ensuring that it was the leaders' platforms that came forward. Those seem to go against what would go into a contract under the debate production. How could you make sure that these journalists weren't raising their own profiles when it should have been a focus of ensuring that Canadians were learning more about the leaders?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Madam Chair, through you to the member, there was substantial criticism about some aspects of both the moderation and the format, and that's why we are recommending that the commission have ultimate responsibility for both the choice of the moderator and the format, but in very close collaboration with the debates production group, particularly if they were chosen earlier than that, and also in very close collaboration with other people who've had experience in what's a good moderator and what's a good format.

Also, in taking advantage of the international experience, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany would have had extensive consultation, and the Australians are going through this at the present time. We think we can do a better job on that and would be prepared to work very hard at it between now and the next election to try to be sure that we're as well informed as we can be.

The Chair: We look forward to that as well. Thank you.

We will now have five minutes with Mr. Warkentin, five minutes with Mrs. Romanado, one minute for Mr. Therrien and two and a half minutes for Ms. Idlout.

Go ahead, Mr. Warkentin.

• (1235)

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Grande Prairie—Mackenzie, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the commissioner and the commissioner's staff. I do appreciate the work you do.

I don't support the creation of the commission, but I do appreciate that the commissioner has taken up this role. I know it's a difficult role, and we appreciate your work on it. I can tell you that I've never seen a good debate with multiple candidates. I think there are always problems with it, so I have some sympathy for the process.

However, I just want to be clear on this. Did you say that CBC/Radio-Canada was the producer of the last debate?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: I'm sorry?

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Was CBC/Radio-Canada the producer of the last debate?

The Chair: Through the chair....

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Madam Chair, CBC/Radio-Canada were the lead in a group of 35 different television stations.

Let me give a precise answer to that question. The debates broadcast group was a partnership of 10 news organizations, with the CBC/Radio-Canada acting on behalf of the consortium which produced the two debates, and that's why the money actually went through CBC.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Through the chair, my understanding is, then, that CBC led the discussions with regard to the editorial decisions and the moderation, as well as the format of the debate. Those seem to be the criticisms that you as a commission have received with regard to the last debate. Are you saying that CBC/Radio-Canada led the production team that was responsible for all those decisions?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Madam Chair, through you, "led" would be a word to say that it kind of organized a group to come to a consensus on what was involved. That group included media organizations like APTN, CBC, CTV, Global,

[*Translation*]

Radio-Canada, Noovo, the Coopérative nationale de l'information indépendante, the *Coops de l'information*, *L'Actualité*, *La Presse*, and *Le Devoir*.

[*English*]

It was out of that collectivity that the decision —

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Who among—

The Right Hon. David Johnston: —was made.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I'm sorry. Were you not finished? I do apologize.

The Right Hon. David Johnston: That's fine.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I have very little time.

Again, through the chair, I just want to be clear. How were these participants paid? Was it a direct allocation to each one of them? Was it given to CBC to allocate that money according to their discretion? How did that work?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: The public broadcaster managed the contract, which had a contractual commitment of up to two million dollars, and the debate production then fell below that to just over \$1.7 million, but what happened was that in the request for proposals there was a clear set-out as to what costs would be covered in what way. As things proceeded, payments were made within that consortium for the expenses incurred.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: CBC itself, as an organization, will become a subject of debate in an election process. It has happened in the past, and I suspect it will occur increasingly as it becomes more difficult to comprehend exactly what role the CBC plays for society in our new modern media.

My question is this: Would the commission be prepared to eliminate groups that were subject to debate from the process of editorial decision-making, moderator selection and all other processes with regard to the debate?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: First of all, the debates production team was chosen in a public tender process with a request for proposals. The proposals came in, and we made the judgment and looked at parts of that.

Going forward, we expect we will use the same kind of process, but we will begin it earlier and have much more intensive consultations with whoever is chosen as the debates production team.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I can't speak on behalf of the party, but through the chair, I would just suggest that I would have some reservation about the neutrality of the commission or its absence of bias if in fact the CBC led that process in the future.

I can tell you that I believe there needs to be a public debate with regard to the future of the CBC, which received billions of dollars from the taxpayer on an ongoing basis in between elections. I believe that they have the possibility of at least an appearance of bias if parties take differential opinions in terms of their future and how that may roll out.

I know you heard this, because I heard from folks who also sent the commission concerns about the moderator from CBC who appeared in a selfie with Justin Trudeau. That was known to the commission before the selection of that individual. Was there any concern? Was that ever raised by members of the staff at the commission about Rosemary Barton—I will name her—being selected as that person, having tweeted out a picture of her and Justin Trudeau prior to that?

The Chair: The remainder of the time will go to the answer before I move on.

• (1240)

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Thank you.

Madam Chair, first of all, thank you for suggestions on how one can best manage the process of choosing the production team.

With respect to the specific incident you mentioned, I'm not aware of it being drawn to my attention. I'm not certain whether other of my colleagues have.

The Chair: I'm glad that has been shared.

I'm going to go to Mrs. Romanado for five minutes.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

In full disclosure I would also like to mention that the Right Honourable David Johnston was the principal and vice-chancellor of my alma mater as well, but it was McGill University. However, I don't have his name on my diploma.

With that, I would like to thank Mr. Johnston for being here today with his colleagues.

I would like to focus on two questions.

The first, obviously, is with respect to recommendation 2 and the selection of a moderator. I read with great interest the report that you submitted to the minister with respect to the moderation. It indicated very clearly that some felt we should consider having a single moderator for future debates. It said, "A veteran debate organizer remarked that a moderator should have a reputation to lose and not a reputation to build."

As a Quebec MP and Quebec candidate, I can tell you first-hand how incredibly insulted I was by Ms. Kurl's unacceptable and biased question during the English debates. I think the question she put forward and the assumptions it brought forward were completely unfair.

With respect to that, in your recommendation regarding the selection of a moderator based on expert consultations, could you let us know how far in advance you start the process of looking at moderators or a moderator in preparing for an election? Could you give us a sense of that, please?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: In general, should the debates commission be continued, we would, in this interim period leading up to the next election, expect to spend a fair amount of time on that question, gathering the best experience we can. As I have indicated, the choice of a moderator is very key, from all our experience.

We try to reflect that in the consultation we have with those who could be involved in the debates production and in ensuring that we have a transparent process for selecting that moderator when we set out the criteria that we think are essential. Having made that choice, as the election unfolds, we want to be sure we have done the due diligence so that our expectations are really there in terms of the track record.

It involves careful, thoughtful preparation and having a pretty good understanding of what a good moderator is and what a good moderator is not.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much.

With respect to recommendation one regarding the approval of the format and the TV production, you mentioned in your report that "The least important factor for Canadians was the need for debate to 'be exciting.'" What we're seeing more and more is a sensationalized TV production of a debate, rather than allowing leader candidates to put forward their policy ideas and positions and explain who they are and why they feel they would be the best leader for our country.

You mentioned the RFP going out with respect to selecting a consortium for the TV production of the debates. Could you elaborate a bit on whether or not a future RFP would include a downplaying of the sensationalizing? How would your first recommendation help eliminate some those "gotcha" moments that seem to be what TV producers are looking for, versus what Canadians are looking for when watching those debates?

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Madam Chair, there are two answers to those two related questions.

Number one, I was really very heartened in the consultations to see that it wasn't entertainment or knockout blows or worldwide wrestling that one was looking for in these debates. The widespread view of Canadians is they are interested in being able to make good choices about who will make good government leaders and good governments in our country. There is a real, earnest search for that, and debates are an important part of that search. It's our responsibility to provide the public with what they clearly want.

We then get to the question of both moderator and format. What we will do, should we be continued, is make our very best efforts to come to understand what makes for a great debate in the public interest and presents as clearly and as deeply as possible the different positions of the different parties. Second, who are the leaders who are best able to fill that role, and what are the characteristics of their leadership that Canadians should expect?

Out of that, in the consultation we would then do with whoever is chosen as the debates production team, we would try to be sure that we have both a moderator and a format that reflect all of those values that we just spoke of.

• (1245)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Perfect. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Therrien, the floor is yours for one minute. You have time to ask a question or make a comment and hear the answer.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The mistake made by the moderator shows that there is an accountability problem. I call it a mistake, because I'm being nice.

Who is to blame?

I'm going to read you what the Premier of Quebec said after Ms. Kurl's question.

"The nation of Quebec has been attacked," Mr. Legault told journalists in Quebec, adding that Shachi Kurl and the group of broadcasters that organized the debate had to apologize.

We didn't get any apologies from the consortium or from Ms. Kurl. In fact, she doesn't even know what she should apologize for. So we're a far cry from apologies.

Does Mr. Johnston think Quebeckers deserve an apology?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left, Mr. Therrien.

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Madam Chair, I deeply regret the difficulties and problems that this question caused.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Does it deserve an apology?

The Chair: I think the witness has answered the question.

Ms. Idlout now has the floor for two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik, iksivautaq.*

I appreciated all the passion about the challenges.

I want to ask what I think is a forward-thinking question. As an Inuk myself, and as an indigenous critic within the NDP, I always feel like it's incumbent upon me to ask about the importance of reconciliation and to ensure that we're all doing the best we can to make sure that first nations, Métis and Inuit needs are being met.

I appreciate recommendation seven that you made. I wondered if you would go further to maybe having discussions in the future about ensuring as well that there are indigenous moderators in future debates.

Qujannamiik.

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Madam Chair, thank you for that question.

Certainly we will have the inclusivity that is part of Canada as an important part of our discussion, and a diversity in attempting to reflect in the general organization of the debates that full inclusivity.

Second, we are pleased that with respect to the presentation in accessible languages, we've made some very good strides in the last two debates, and we think we can make more.

In this last debate, part of the production team was APTN, who were valuable partners. One of the seven advisers was Jean La Rose, who was CEO of APTN for a number of years and brought great thoughtfulness to our work. We presented the debates in six indigenous languages, and that was important.

Should we be continued, we will be working with the translators in the course of the next months and years, because translation into some of the languages was a challenge. It is a rather attractive opportunity for someone to be chosen for those translations. With more time to work with them, we think we can do an even more effective job in mastering the languages and in working with Heritage Canada to see how other programs to reinforce indigenous languages are very much part of our democratic institutions.

It will certainly be a clear part of our expectations and our work in the years ahead with the Leaders' Debates Commission.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so much.

I would like to reiterate, on behalf of the committee, our appreciation for the work you are doing. I think you can recognize, with the interest in the questions, that we are concerned and we are appreciative. We look forward to continuing to do that work together. PROC has this mandate as to how we further this conversation, so thank you for making yourself available today.

I hope you and your family are keeping well and safe. It's great to see you here.

As well, to Mr. Cormier and Ms. Ouimet, thank you so much for being with us. Please keep well and safe.

• (1250)

The Right Hon. David Johnston: Chair and members of the committee, we are very grateful for the opportunity to be with you, and we are all very grateful to be part of this process.

Democracy matters, debates count, and we will appreciate your advice. With any luck, there will be an opportunity for the Leaders' Debates Commission to be continued and very much guided by your deliberations.

Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent.

We will resume with a quick closing of our committee business.

I need to report the main estimates to the House, and I'm asking for consent to group all of the questions together. There are four questions.

Shall votes 1, under House of Commons, Leaders' Debates Commission, Chief Electoral Officer and Parliamentary Protective Service, of the main estimates 2022-23 carry?

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$395,255,315

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

LEADERS' DEBATES COMMISSION

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$421,549

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$49,335,030

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

PARLIAMENTARY PROTECTIVE SERVICE

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$89,504,130

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the main estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: While I have 30 seconds, the clerk shared the study budgets for the precinct, and the main estimates. Are we all okay with him proceeding with them?

We are. Excellent. Thank you.

Keep well and safe, everyone. We will see you next week.

The meeting is adjourned.

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