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The Debates Debate - Elizabeth May

As I tour the Saanich-Gulf Islands riding in the last round of townhall meetings before the 2015 election, I have had a lot of questions about the national televised leaders' debate. The current situation is nothing if not confusing, so I thought a review might be helpful.

Since the 1960s there has been a national televised leaders' debate. It has become such an integral part of the national election campaign that many Canadians assume it is required by law, or is run by Elections Canada. In fact, it has always been a rather informal arrangement. The country's leading broadcasters formed a 'consortium' decades ago to organize and broadcast a French and an English debate among the party leaders whose parties held a seat in Parliament. The broadcasters—CBC, Radio-Canada, CTV, Global, and French commercial network TVA—have established the rules and format in each election.

In 2008, I was included in the debates after public pressure forced the Conservatives and the NDP to drop their private ultimatum to the broadcasters that if the Green Party was included, they would not show up. I was excluded in the following election of 2011, just when the reach of the debates was broader than ever, with 10 million Canadians watching the English language debate and 4 million watching the debate in French.

As far as I was aware, a few months ago, as soon as the consortium decided if I was in the 2015 debates or not, the matter would be settled. Our case, I knew, was strong. We have two MPs in the House, and I was elected under the GPC banner. Preston Manning, leader of the Reform Party, had been included in the 1993 leaders' debate even though he did not yet have a seat in the House because one Reform MP, Deb Gray, did. (By the way, being included in those debates contributed to Reform winning 52 seats—from one seat to 52!)

The Progressive Conservative Party had been in the debates in 1997 with only two seats following their defeat in 1993. The NDP had been in a number of national debates before they reached the number of 12 MPs (required to receive public funds for party work in the House).

In 2011, we were the only party in Canadian history to be excluded from the debates, despite having candidates in every riding, and nearly a million votes in the previous election campaign. So I was relieved, but not surprised, when the consortium invited

the Green Party to send representatives to the planning meeting for the national televised leaders' debate. We were in!

The Conservatives were, however, not willing to accept a debate engaging all the national leaders in the House. A few days after the meeting, Harper's director of communications denounced the consortium as a 'cabal' and announced that Stephen Harper would not show up. Amazingly, the Conservatives cloaked the boycott on the national television leaders' debate with a claim that Stephen Harper wanted to do more debates—not less.

This strategy of confusion appears to be working. One network, TVA, owned by separatist leader Pierre-Karl Peladeau, withdrew from the consortium and promised its own debate. Harper's spin-doctor, Kory Teneyke, former head of Sun News, has said the Conservatives will accept five debates, of which four are confirmed—TVA, Munk Debates, Globe and Mail and Macleans. One debate remains to be accepted to round out the Conservative five debate offer. One of those will not be the televised national leaders' debate.

Of the four debates Harper has accepted, I have not been invited to three—TVA, Munk Debates, and the Globe and Mail. The Liberals have refused to accept any debate that excludes the Greens; the NDP has accepted all of them.

As well, there are a number of single issue debates. CARP wants a debate on seniors issues; a large group of NGOs wants a debate on womens issues. I have accepted those invitations—but the Conservatives have not.

So, if you are keeping score, it will be clear that only one debate now has a commitment from all federal party leaders in the House, excluding the Bloc which is only invited to the French debate.

Only *Macleans* magazine's debate will allow exchanges between Stephen Harper, Tom Mulcair, Justin Trudeau and me.

The *Macleans* debate is now scheduled to take place in Toronto on August 6. I do not know how many Canadians will be watching the networks that have agreed to broadcast *Macleans*' debate—City TV and CPAC. A debate in the dog days of summer is a novelty, but I am pretty sure it will not come close to the 10 million Canadians who watched the 2011 English language debate organized by the consortium.

Moreover, for 2015, CBC, Radio-Canada, Global and CTV

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have made new and creative efforts to expand the reach of the debates. They have forged a new social media partnership with Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Vine. The goal is to increase voter turn-out and be extending the audience for the debate. And that is the debate, both English and French versions, rejected by Stephen Harper.

To the credit of the consortium, they are holding firm. The networks plan to go ahead with the debates with Tom Mulcair, Justin Trudeau and me—and leave an empty podium for Stephen Harper.

Unless one of the other leaders bails, I think Harper will be forced to occupy that empty podium. But in the meantime, should you be inclined to let the *Globe and Mail*, TVA and the Munk Debates know what you think of them letting Stephen Harper make the rules for their specialized boutique debates, I would appreciate it. Not for me, but for democracy. 🍷