MEMO

French-Language Leaders' Debate Recap and Analysis

<u>GREETINGS</u>

Just one week after the last French-language debate on TVA, the four main candidates, plus Ms. Annamie Paul (Green Party of Canada), vying for the position of Prime Minister, met again at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec, for a two-hour debate on five predetermined themes, which were quite similar to those already discussed last Thursday on TVA. However, the debate had a more dynamic aspect by combining each theme with a particular configuration (for example, a question from a voter, a debate between 2-3 candidates, a question from a journalist). By avoiding repeating the mistakes made on TVA, these different interaction options were intended to challenge the consistency of the candidates when questioned and to diversify the overall debate experience for the audience.

As an introduction, the host asked the candidates directly if they would go back to the polls in the event of a minority government. Mr. Justin Trudeau and Mr. Erin O'Toole both avoided answering this question. However, Ms. Annamie Paul and Mr. Jagmeet Singh said that they would respect their mandate if they won.

<u>THE ISSUES</u>

PANDEMIC AND HEALTHCARE

On the issue of health transfers, Mr. Erin O'Toole continued to state that he would provide $27 billion in unconditional transfers. He also reiterated his support for universal public health care. His Liberal competitor offered $25 billion with strings attached.

Although they did not provide a figure, Ms. Annamie Paul and Mr. Jagmeet Singh agreed in principle on the health transfers. These transfers would be part of a broader reform of the Canadian health care model, but no details were provided on what they would consider.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet denounced the federal government's practice of withholding health transfers in exchange for greater federal involvement at the provincial level.

COST OF LIVING AND PUBLIC FINANCES

The economic issues focused on the labour shortage and the measures traditionally announced by the parties outside of elections were again highlighted. Mr. Erin O'Toole said that he would give more power in terms of immigration to the province of Quebec, especially in the agricultural sector, and that he was in favor of stopping the COVID-19 emergency

programs to boost the economy. Mr. Jagmeet Singh strongly disagreed. On the contrary, he pledged to continue the CRB program.

A suspension of aid programs was put forward by Mr. Yves-François Blanchet except for the tourism and arts sectors. Justin Trudeau did not support the idea of suspending the CRB because it is less than the minimum wage but insisted on the importance of providing better training instead. Ms. Annamie Paul suggested the idea of replacing these federal supports with a universal wage to help support the cost of living. This would have no impact on the ability of Canadians to work, an idea supported by Mr. Jagmeet Singh.

All candidates finally agreed on the idea of providing better training for workers to meet the latent labour demands of Canadian businesses.

CLIMATE

Fossil fuels were the main issue in this debate. Mr. Justin Trudeau stressed the importance of capping greenhouse gas emissions and reiterated his ambition that all Canadian vehicles be electric by 2035. However, other candidates have pointed out his inconsistency with his green agenda. Beyond the TransMountain project, the Trudeau government has continued to grant drilling permits and subsidies to oil companies during its term.

These would be banned under a Green or NDP government. The NDP has also proposed the idea of free public transportation in cities.

Mr. Erin O'Toole confirmed his commitment to the Paris Agreement, but did not elaborate on the measures he would put in place.

For his part, Mr. Yves-François Blanchet reiterated the idea of establishing a cap on oil production and forcing banks to finance renewable energy rather than oil companies. The latter's subsidies would be invested in Alberta to convert its economy to renewable energy. However, his past pro-oil statements have been highlighted by his competitors.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, CULTURAL INDUSTRIES, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

On the Indigenous peoples' issue, the debate was essentially about the accessibility of drinking water in First Nations' communities. The Trudeau government was strongly criticized for its inaction. A lack of will was particularly highlighted.

Mr. Singh was the only candidate to promise to recognize Indigenous languages as official languages in Canada. Federal services could be provided in Indigenous languages if a Conservative government is formed for Erin O'Toole.

JUSTICE AND FOREIGN POLICY

The debate demonstrated a lack of global vision on foreign policy on the part of all candidates. On the Afghan issue, the Trudeau government's decisions were strongly criticized. Canada's lack of credibility on the international scene was pointed out by all candidates.

The relationship between Justin Trudeau and Joe Biden was also discussed, particularly on the issue of open borders during the pandemic. Justin Trudeau has not been able to provide sufficient justification for this situation.

The Huawei issue was quickly addressed. Specifically, Mr. Erin O'Toole continued to hammer home his ambition to restrain Chinese ambitions without giving further details.

OVERALL ANALYSIS

Overall, no major announcements were made and the same weaknesses of the candidates that were apparent in the TVA debate were demonstrated once again. While some of the candidates' measures were clarified, notably on health transfers, the debate did not address issues that are essential to Canada's future, such as the Canadian North, digitization, housing, public finances, or agriculture. The climate debate alone reflects the lack of coherence in the candidates' programs. No questions on the green economy or carbon neutrality were addressed.

Despite a better performance than in the previous TVA debate, Mr. Jagmeet Singh still appears to be a less than credible candidate, mainly because of his inability to justify the sources of funding for the measures he is promising.

Mr. Justin Trudeau has been severely criticized for his inaction in many areas while in office for the past six years. He has not provided a convincing answer to the choice of calling an election during the pandemic. However, this argument was constantly repeated by all candidates against Trudeau throughout the debate, making the argument irrelevant.

Justin Trudeau emerged as the most convincing candidate in this democratic exercise, thanks to his affirmation of belonging to the Quebec nation in response to an attack by Yves-François Blanchet. His invective against the Conservatives, denouncing them as a threat to Canada's French-speaking minorities because of their habit of cutting their subsidies, was also noted.

MEMO

While Erin O'Toole did not come out on top in the debate, his performance was rather good, and he did not make any mistakes. However, Justin Trudeau's attack on his image as a leader by calling his leadership "soft" could have a negative impact on the rest of his campaign. In addition, the tendency of his program to constantly change according to his statements has been highlighted on several occasions, underlining his sometimes-indecisive nature.