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TVA French-Language Federal Leaders' Debate Recap and Analysis

GREETINGS

After a brief introduction of what the debate would entail, the moderator began to ask questions without leaving any presentation period for the candidates. Through several rounds of questions, 2 selected candidates had 4 and a half minutes each to give their answer and debate. There were 3 themes in this debate: the pandemic, social policies, and the future of Canada.

THE ISSUES

I – THE PANDEMIC (AND THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM)

- As a first question, Mr. Trudeau was asked his opinion on Canadians who still refuse to be vaccinated. He stated his willingness to "limit the privileges" of these people. Mr. Singh and Mr. O'Toole do not support mandatory vaccinations. Mr. Singh supported his idea of a national vaccine passport while Mr. O'Toole defended the option of daily COVID-19 screening. However, the Conservative candidate was strongly challenged by the other three for not requiring his team to be vaccinated.
- The host raised public concern about the ever-increasing government spending during the pandemic. Mr. Trudeau insisted that the federal government will support Canadians for as long as necessary. When asked about his commitment to balancing the federal budget without cuts, Mr. O'Toole did not give a clear answer as to whether he would cut funding for social programs. Despite Mr. Trudeau's attacks on his public statements about increasing the role of private companies in the health sector, Mr. O'Toole reiterated his support for a universal, public health care system.
- Both Mr. Blanchet and Mr. O'Toole supported the idea of health transfer to the provinces without any conditions. The Conservative candidate has even proposed increasing this program by \$60 billion. Jagmeet Singh did not provide a conclusive answer on this topical issue as well as on the lack of nurses and health care workers in Quebec. This reveals a lack of proposals on his part.
- Mr. Trudeau was challenged on his idea of a 10% income increase for the most vulnerable older Canadians. Both Blanchet and O'Toole challenged his idea of creating two separate categories of seniors. Mr. Singh supported the idea of a universal income for Canadian seniors.

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- While all the candidates stated their commitment to having Canada produce its own vaccines in the near future, Mr. Trudeau declined to confirm whether the Moderna plant would be located in Quebec or Ontario. Mr. Singh said the infrastructure should be public.

II – SOCIAL POLICIES

- The Liberal government's announcement of \$6 billion in funding to help develop Quebec's network of childcare centres was supported by Mr. Blanchet. This is a sensitive issue in Quebec. Mr. O'Toole confirmed that he will “coordinate” with the Quebec government without promising to honour past Liberal commitments if he becomes Prime Minister.
- On the issue of secularism, Mr. Trudeau criticized Quebec's Bill 21, stating that "he will not suspend the federal government's right to support minorities. He did, however, confirm his willingness to defend Francophones across Canada because he believes bilingualism is a Canadian value. Mr. O'Toole mentioned that "[he] will not introduce such a bill in the federal Parliament" but expressed his respect for the division of legislative powers. He reiterated that he would enforce Bill 101 in workplaces under federal jurisdiction. Mr. Singh did not provide a detailed plan and mentioned that there should be more investment in education.
- On Medical Assistance In Dying (MAID), all candidates agreed that it is a complex and convoluted issue that should be analyzed and debated in Parliament. All candidates except Mr. O'Toole advocated for access to this right.

III – THE FUTURE OF CANADA

- With CERB and CRB benefits being criticized as playing a role in the labor shortage, the candidates were asked what solutions they could provide. Mr. Singh denied that these programs have any impact because they are below minimum wage. Mr. Blanchet assumed his pro-suspension position only when these aids are not absolutely necessary except for the case of the art industry. Mr. O'Toole pledged to reduce them in the case of hotels and restaurants and tried to highlight his plan to develop high-speed internet by 2025 as a solution to help boost the economy.
- All the candidates avoided giving a clear answer to the question of whether they would agree to be part of a coalition government. Mr. Blanchet finally confirmed that

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the Bloc will not participate in any such form of government. Mr. Trudeau desperately tried to change the topic of the debate to the vaccination campaign.

- On the environmental crisis, neither candidate provided a satisfactory or substantive response. Mr. Trudeau was widely attacked for the Transmountain project, which he justified, as in 2019, as the first step in his plan to move Canada to renewable energy. Mr. Blanchet supports the idea of reducing oil production and stopping additional funding to the oil industry. Mr. O'Toole spoke about his carbon tax model and Mr. Singh did not provide specific details of his plan, although he did state his intention to invest in renewable energy.

IV - MISSED OR UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

During the debate, a number of topics raised by the TV host were unfortunately quickly left aside.

1. Attention to the environmental issue and to the First Nations was entirely missed despite the respective importance of these two subjects in light of recent events.
2. The situation in Afghanistan only provided space for Trudeau's opponents to criticize his decisions.
3. The issue of immigration quickly drifted into the protection of the French language in Canada.
4. The rising cost of living issue left Mr. Singh unanswered and Mr. Trudeau advocating his housing policy. Reducing the price of telephone bills was an argument that both candidates also defended.

OVERALL ANALYSIS

THE CANDIDATES' PERFORMANCE

Mr. Trudeau emerged as the most aggressive and best prepared of all the candidates. He proved once again his skills in political debate, although he was severely challenged on his political stocktaking, including his decision to call an election during a pandemic and his opportunism to strengthen his majority.

Despite his many ideas, Mr. O'Toole has remained more on the sidelines. He had difficulty selling his commitments as real alternatives to the Liberal agenda. The debate highlighted his overly cautious approach to expressing his views. To avoid any awkwardness, he often referred to his respect for the division of legislative powers. On the other hand, his lack of response and the weaknesses of his program were highlighted during the debate. His line of defence was to repeat that he had a "plan" (or "contract") for all Canadians and Quebecers

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without providing further details. In addition, Mr. Trudeau twice pointed out that his program was not measured. At the end of the debate, Mr. O'Toole tried to position himself as a candidate who listens to Quebecers. He thus reiterated his willingness to respect Quebec's exclusive powers and to work with Premier Legault, particularly on health transfers and the defence of the French language. While his performance was good overall, he clearly did not appear to be fully comfortable during the debate, nor did he shine brightly enough to emerge as a strong alternative to Mr. Trudeau.

Mr. Blanchet outlined the Bloc's traditional approach of defending only the interests of Quebec and respect for the province's exclusive powers. He stood up to Mr. Trudeau and Mr. O'Toole, showed his knowledge on many issues, did not hesitate to challenge his opponents and was not thrown off balance throughout the debate. Mr. Blanchet showed his ease in debating during the program.

Unlike Mr. Blanchet, Mr. Singh gave a very disappointing and weak performance during the debate. His answers were too often approximate or vague to be convincing enough. Many questions were left unanswered when he was questioned, highlighting the serious flaws in his program. Mr. Singh seems to be the unfortunate loser in this exercise.