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OPINION

Quebec TV grilling suggests election won't be a rerun



TASHA KHEIRIDDIN

On Sunday, Radio-Canada televised a two-hour editorial-board style grilling of the federal party leaders in French — and set a new bar for election programming. In contrast with traditional debates, which often feature more shouting than substance, the “meet the press” format saw the politicians peppered with smart questions, elicited some honest responses, and even managed a few laughs. And it shone a spotlight on election priorities in Quebec, which is shaping up to be the key battleground in the current campaign.

The main take-aways? First, everyone's French was surprisingly good, most noticeably Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole's. You could almost hear the collective exhale of Tory partisans as O'Toole deftly fielded questions, in contrast to more cringeworthy performances in 2019 by former leader Andrew Scheer. Franco-phone voters can genuinely look forward to the substance of the first French-language leaders' debate this Thursday evening, instead of focusing on live-tweeting the Conservative leader's language gaffes.

Second, the interviews actually featured six political leaders, not five. Quebec Premier François Legault wasn't there in person, but he was the elephant in the room. A couple of days previously, he had issued his election list of “demands” for Quebec and pronounced the Liberal and NDP platforms “much more centrist” than those of their rivals, notably on the issue of health care. While Legault's remarks could boost the Bloc Québécois, the Tories might actually gain the most by appearing to be a safe harbour for soft-nationalist voters, particularly in tight races with the Bloc around Quebec City.

Legault's comments also prompted the Radio-Canada panel to ask Bloc Leader Yves-François Blanchet whether his party has become a “front” for Legault's Coalition Avenir Québec party, a charge Blanchet denied. They also asked whether provincial deals made with Ottawa, such as Quebec's \$6-billion share of federal daycares, undermine the Bloc's ultimate goal, Quebec independence. “So federalism works, then?” asked panellist Anne-Marie Dussault, to which Blanchet huffily responded that there was a difference between seeking powers bit by bit from Ottawa and inherently having all of them as a “true nation.”

That may not be enough to satisfy Bloc hardliners, however, some of whom are grumbling about the lack of the word “independence” in the party's platform. Expect Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau to push Blanchet on the question in the debates. If Trudeau can get Blanchet to take a harder line on sovereignty, it could draw nationalist votes from the Tories back to the Bloc, while siphoning federalist votes from the Tories to the Liberals in reaction to a sense of resurgent nationalist rage.

Finally, the other big battleground in Quebec will likely be the environment, which saw both O'Toole and Blanchet on the defensive Sunday night. When asked whether he would force an east-west pipeline on the province, O'Toole didn't directly address the question, deferring to “respecting constitutional jurisdictions” and confirming only that he would support existing projects, such as Trans Mountain.

Meanwhile, Blanchet was quizzed about his support for a \$10-billion tunnel project under the St. Lawrence River that has been heavily criticized by environmentalists, and for which Legault is asking Ottawa to foot 40 per cent of the bill. The provincial Parti Québécois has come out against the project, further causing division among sovereigntist ranks that threaten to undermine Bloc support. “I know it can be done in a much more ecological way, but the decision will not be made by me, but by the government of Quebec,” responded Blanchet.

Both Green party Leader Annamie Paul and NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh will also likely get their digs in on these issues in the upcoming debates, though their efforts will likely not raise their seat count in the province, which stand at zero and one, respectively. When panellists asked him whether he could support a potential Conservative minority government, Singh responded “I am in this election to win,” prompting a round of sardonic chuckles from his questioners. It was one of the lighter moments of the night, but highlighted just how far the NDP's seat has fallen in the province that Jack Layton painted orange in 2011 — and how central the province will be in deciding who forms the next federal government.

Tasha Kheiriddin is a Postmedia columnist and principal with Navigator Ltd.



Musa Muhammad arrives for the first day of school at St. Monica Elementary in N.D.G. on Tuesday. Ensuring high vaccination numbers in the general population will be key in preventing viral transmission in schools, Christopher Labos writes. PIERRE OBENDRAUF

How to help protect the under-12 crowd

If enough of us get vaccinated, we benefit those who cannot



CHRISTOPHER LABOS

With the start of the academic year, many people have been asking how we can protect students and prevent outbreaks in schools. The good news is that the situation today is much better than it was a year ago because the vaccine rollout has drastically reduced the number of daily infections. So even though we are now at the beginning of a fourth wave, we should remember that without the vaccines the numbers would be much higher than they actually are.

Still, how to handle the return to school is an evolving issue even though many of the solutions remain largely the same. Wearing masks, physically distancing and ensuring proper ventilation in classrooms are key. But the most important thing we can do to protect students is to

get vaccinated. Obviously, a classroom full of vaccinated students is going to be a much lower risk setting than a classroom with only some or no vaccinated students. Especially as in-class learning resumes, ensuring high vaccination numbers is going to be key in preventing viral transmission in schools.

But many are worried about the under-12 crowd that cannot receive vaccinations yet. While data on this age group is expected later this year, for now students under 12 need other protections against the virus. That protection is us.

Throughout this pandemic, many people have been talking about “herd immunity,” although not always using the term correctly. Basically herd immunity means that if enough of us get vaccinated, we can protect others in the population who cannot. Much like a herd of animals will protect their young by surrounding them and keeping them in the centre of the herd, so too can we protect our young by getting

vaccinated and metaphorically surrounding them by a wall of people immune to the virus.

The reason such strategies work is that most viral transmission occurs at home. While workplace outbreaks have happened and are an issue in and of themselves, household transmission was and is a major driver of the pandemic. The reality is that you spend more time with the people you live with than with most other people in your life. As any parent with young children knows, when a viral illness infects one member of the family, it will quickly infect everyone else in the house. A recent updated systematic review found that the secondary attack rate — in other words, the risk of the virus infecting another member of the same household once one person was infected — was almost 20 per cent overall. However, when researchers looked at studies done between July 2020 and March 2021, during the worst of the second and third waves, the secondary attack rate was over 30 per cent. There was also some evidence that the secondary attack rate went up as more infectious variants emerged.

The worry, of course, is that students could catch COVID-19 at home and then come to school and infect their classmates. There always has to be a first index case in any school outbreak and statistically that index case is most likely to catch the virus from their family. And so the best way to protect younger students who cannot be vaccinated is to get vaccinated ourselves. The less COVID-19 there is circulating out there in the community, the less likely it is to enter your home and the less likely that it will be brought into our schools.

The goal of vaccines is not just to protect ourselves, but also to protect the most vulnerable in our society like our children. Dismissing vaccinations because you think, rightly or wrongly, that you are at low risk for complications from COVID-19 misses a key point. We get vaccinated not just to protect ourselves, but the other members of our herd as well. There's an important lesson in that. To avoid danger animals form herds and stick together. Only humans try to save themselves.

Christopher Labos is a Montreal physician.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Outdoor readings an inspiring story

Re: “A time to connect or to disconnect” (Extra, Aug. 28)

What an absolutely praiseworthy initiative on the part of professor William Bukowski and his wife Nina Howel!

Rather than allowing the ravages of the pandemic to isolate neighbours even more, they chose creative means to communicate with one another.

The stimulating readings surely encouraged interesting discussions during these outdoor gatherings. They most certainly continued later in individual households.

How wonderful that some of the readings included children as well. This project is sure to inspire many of us to follow through on a fine example of maintaining human connection no matter the challenge.

Vivienne M. Silver, Côte-St-Luc

Enforce mask rules on commuter trains

I took the late morning EXO train last Tuesday from Pointe-Claire to Vendôme station. The car was full.

Wearing a mask on board is obligatory, but as I scanned the horizon I noted that most of the younger people had their masks under their chins as they talked with their friends. No one was there to enforce the policy during the length of the ride.

EXO needs to have better enforcement to keep its passengers safe.

Jane Edwards, Pointe-Claire

Right to protest taken too far

Re: “Trudeau assailed by angry crowd at Ontario rally” (NP Montreal, Aug. 30)

We are very fortunate as Canadians to have the right to demonstrate and express our discontent with our political leadership. However, when

I see Canadians exhibit vulgarity and express profanity in doing so, it diminishes the effectiveness of the protests.

Also, racist slurs toward a Black officer and a misogynist insult toward a female officer are not acceptable. I think as Canadians we are better than this.

Ted Levine, Côte-St-Luc

Stop the gouging with regulations

Re: “This is how much major banks would have to pay if Trudeau sees tax pledge become reality” (NP Montreal, Aug. 27)

If Justin Trudeau's plan to implement a three per cent surtax on bank and life insurance profits over \$1 billion represents his grasp of how things work in this world, then he has just lost my vote (a lifelong Liberal voter, by the way). All they will do is somehow pass this cost on to us. What we want to hear are regulations that will

stop these institutions from gouging us with endless fees and outrageous rates at every opportunity they can justify by the flimsiest of excuses. In my view, insurance companies in particular are out of control — if they could, they would have us report every sneeze, every time we turn on a light or use a door as indicators of our risk factors.

Pierre Montpetit, Sennerville

Call around for cellphone rates

Re: “Candidates pivot to affordability crisis” (NP Montreal, Aug. 26)

Cellphone rates are not expensive; you just have to shop around. I found a company that charges \$46 per month (taxes included) with a 3 GB limit and other long-distance perks.

John Schweetlich, Cartierville

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