

Gearing Up for the Next Election

On January 18, 2019, the Canadian Study of Parliament Group held a seminar entitled “Gearing Up for the Next Election” to hear from experts about the preparations necessary in advance of the fall 2019 election. The well-attended gathering brought together political strategists as well as the Chief Electoral Officer and Parliamentary Budget Officer.

David Groves and Charlie Feldman

Political Strategy

The seminar opened with a panel of political strategists offering their assessment of where Canada’s federal political parties currently stand and their predictions for the 2019 federal election.

Michele Austin, Head of Government, Public Policy, and Philanthropy at Twitter Canada, spoke first. She focused on what Twitter can tell Canadians about the issues resonating with Canadians and what strengths each party will bring to the election. First, she noted that Twitter’s audience is young and interested in politics – in her assessment, the biggest organic hashtag (i.e., not a product of an advertising campaign) is #cdnpoli (which directs users to tweets about Canadian politics). Second, she noted that the biggest policy conversations among Canadian Twitter users tend to revolve around energy and immigration – and that these are, as a result, likely to be big subjects during the federal election. Lastly, she observed that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau receives, by far, the most attention and engagement on Twitter of all the federal party leaders, but that some portion of this engagement comes from abroad. As such, she questioned whether his popularity online would translate into a strong showing at the ballot box.

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Kevin Bosch, Vice President of Public Affairs at Hill+Knowlton Strategies, opened his remarks with a discussion on recent polling. After reviewing survey results suggesting a close race between the Liberal Party and Conservative Party of Canada with a lot of fluidity in voter intention, Mr. Bosch predicted that both parties will have strong incentives to avoid moderation and to make bold partisan or ideological appeals in their platforms and campaigns. He further predicted that policy-making and platform development in 2019, both in the lead up to and during the election, will be faster and more reactive than in the past; parties will be engaging with the electorate in real time on social media. Last, he noted recent changes in electoral administration that are likely to have an effect. These include: a heightened concern around foreign interference; the establishment of the independent debate commission; the imposition of third-party pre-election spending limits; and the expansion of voting rights for Canadians living abroad.

Karl Belanger, President of Traxxon Strategies, began his presentation by stressing the increasing uncertainty of politics in the social media age. He argued that many truisms of Canadian politics, like the electoral strength of a first-term Prime Minister with a majority in Parliament, may no longer hold. After surveying the status of the federal parties and their leaders, he speculated that the uncertainty that has come to define Western electoral politics in the last few years may relate to declining party loyalty among voters. Canadians, he observed, are less likely to join parties, to donate money, or to volunteer; but they are more likely to consider multiple parties before they vote, even those that may have little in common in terms of policy platforms, and more likely to vote



From left: Charlie Feldman, Michele Austin, Kevin Bosch, and Karl Belanger.

differently from election to election. This means that elections can, and often do, bring big surprises, and that once reliable metrics – like the strength of a party’s voter outreach organization or fundraising – may not mean much anymore.

The panelists took questions from the audience, which included queries about whether the by-elections occurring at the time of this writing are in any way indicative of the federal election, the interaction between federal political leaders and their real or perceived provincial counterparts, and the rising importance of social media in politics.

Costing Promises

Parliamentary Budget Officer Yves Giroux presented on the role and mandate of the PBO in advance of the 43rd Canadian federal general election. He began by recounting the history of the relatively-new PBO in Canada and explaining that its mandate in relation to elections had been significantly expanded as a result of recent legislative amendments to the *Parliament of Canada Act*. In particular, the legislation as amended requires that the PBO “at the request of an authorized representative or a member, estimate the financial cost of any election campaign proposal that the authorized representative’s party or the member is considering making.”

In the PBO’s view, this provision can give certain election promises greater credibility with the electorate; however, it creates certain challenges in respect of its implementation. The provision creates a 120-day window in advance of an election for such requests to be made. Assuming the next election will be held in October 2019, this window opens in June 2019.

In respect of requests, the PBO will only work on proposals that are reasonably and practically feasible, within federal jurisdiction, specific and sufficiently detailed, have a proven track record, and intended for the requester’s platform only. In other words, the PBO needs to know enough about what is being proposed specifically in order for the costing analysis to be informed; however, the PBO will not evaluate the wisdom of a particular policy approach nor propose any alternatives. Further, the PBO will aim to be equitable – in terms of time and budget resources – among those who make requests. Given that the independent legislatively-mandated costing of election promises is new at the federal level in Canada, it is difficult to predict who will ask what and when; however, the PBO needs to be able to respond.

Institutionally, this new mandate has meant building capacity for modelling and analytics – the PBO has gone from 15 to approximately 40 employees



Moderator Geneviève Tellier with Yves Giroux.

and its budget has increased from \$2.6 to \$7 million. As well, the legislation permits the PBO to enter into agreements with departments in relation to costing; an agreement is already in place in this regard with the Department of Finance. In preparing to discharge this new mandate, the PBO consulted with other jurisdictions that engage similar practices – such as Australia and the Netherlands – to learn from their experiences.

In relation to Canadian implementation, the PBO published a proposed framework in 2018. However, noted the PBO, this is a “north of the Queensway” issue that didn’t necessarily resonate with the broader Canadian public. That is, the public may not be avidly following the PBO’s proposals in this regard at present. However, implementation consultations continue with various political entities and the PBO released some example models in 2018 as well as costed the Fall Economic Statement as a rehearsal to be prepared for the election.

In answering questions from the audience, the PBO explained that he will not cost full platforms and ‘bless’ their fiscal soundness but would only cost individual items requested. If politicians sought to twist the PBO’s words or analysis, he

would be prepared to intervene in the public discourse to explain what was asked and what was done. In respect of cooperation from departments (necessary for the costing) the PBO explained that he would be undeterred from ‘naming and shaming’ uncooperative actors in order to ensure the full and forthright support of agencies and departments necessary to inform the PBO’s analysis as required by law.

Administering the Election

Chief Electoral Officer Stéphane Perrault presented on preparations for the upcoming 43rd Canadian federal general election particularly in light of the *Elections Modernization Act*, which received Royal Assent in December 2018. Perrault began by explaining that although some may think of an election as a one-day event, it takes months and even years to plan elections. On polling day alone, Elections Canada has over 300,000 people working in more than 15,000 locations across Canada in order to make an election happen.

The CEO explained that each election is studied in order to improve future elections, which are also informed by post-election surveys and ongoing

consultations with stakeholders including parties and candidates. The CEO explained, for example, that while advance poll turnout had increased by 10 per cent in each election steadily for a few elections, the turnout in 2015 increased 75 per cent at advance polls and 100 per cent for special ballot voting. Given the increasing trend of early participation internationally, Elections Canada is preparing to increase advance polling capacity even further. While new legislation requires longer advance poll hours (9am to 9pm), Elections Canada will also be increasing the number of advance polling locations from 5,000 to 6,000 across the country – particularly increasing locations in rural areas where travel times had been a barrier to participation.

Similarly, the CEO hopes to improve election delivery in relation to special ballots. As Perrault explained, there was a 19-minute average wait to cast ballots on campuses in the last election. He hopes that this wait will be cut in half for the 2019 election. To assist, Elections Canada is increasing the number of on-campus polling locations from 40 in 2015 to more than 100 for the 2019 election. Further, the CEO hopes to improve election delivery in Indigenous communities, with a pilot project occurring in some 77 communities where barriers to registration and voting were found to be higher than elsewhere in the country during the last election.

Technological advancements have also brought about changes in the work of Elections Canada. For example, certain voters can register entirely online by uploading documents, and a new online portal for parties and will allow candidates to file nomination papers online instead of having to present them in person at a returning office. As well, certain financial returns can also be filed online. Moreover, the portal will allow for certain riding-level information to be readily accessible such as maps and lists.

The CEO observed that the electoral landscape was evolving in relation to ‘trust’ in elections. As he explained, a trusted election in its most basic sense is one where the count is transparent and established procedures are followed. In Canada that may mean other important aspects of an election are taken for granted, such as safe access to the polls and a free press. However, continued the CEO, the new threat to electoral trust stems from cyber security

and outside interference. In that regard, new training and collaborations are in place to safeguard Canada’s election infrastructure. As well, the CEO noted, Elections Canada will actively monitor social media to combat disinformation and misinformation with respect to the electoral process.

In relation to the *Elections Modernization Act*, the CEO characterized it as “by far the largest reform we’ve ever had of the *Canada Elections Act*” and explained that much work remains to be done to implement its various provisions before the election, such as changes to 20-some IT systems that are now being tested. As well, many election-related manuals and training materials will need to be revisited. In this regard, a simulation will be run from March to April in 10 electoral districts around the country to stress-test the election system. When portions of the amended legislation are ready for implementation prior to their official coming-into-force date, the CEO signals this in the *Canada Gazette*, which brings the provisions into force. While many changes are in the works (or have been completed) not all of these will be immediately apparent online at the time of this writing because by-elections are occurring at present under the provisions of the *Canada Elections Act* as they read before the *Elections Modernization Act* -- the CEO indicated his desire to minimize any possible confusion by not publishing information on processes that will be employed for the October general election at a time when by-elections are occurring under existing rules and practices.



Moderator Nicole Sloan with Stéphane Perrault.