

Second French debate draws clear battle lines as campaign heads into home stretch^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In the second French televised debate of the current election campaign on Wednesday September 8, Conservative leader Erin O'Toole could not hide his party's plans for child care.

A Conservative government led by O'Toole would walk away from federal-provincial agreements with six provinces to fund provincially-run child care programs to the tune of \$27 billion.

The federal-Quebec agreement guarantees \$6 billion per year for that province, which it stands to lose if O'Toole becomes prime minister.

During the previous French debate, on Thursday September 2, O'Toole was deliberately vague about his child care plans. But a little less than a week later, O'Toole had no place to hide.

That is because the second French debate happened after the Conservatives released their costed platform, which states clearly that the all of the promised federal money for child care, every penny of it, would be gone.

The Liberals, of course, would maintain the child care agreements, which are their doing. So would the Greens and the New Democrats, whose only criticism of the Liberals on this issue is that they took three decades to fulfill their promise.

Since they are, in leader Yves-François Blanchet's favourite phrase "good for Quebec," the Bloc Québécois is also 100 per cent in favour of the child care agreements.

That left Conservative leader alone on the stage, with nothing to offer but progressively-skewed tax credits for parents, notionally to help defray the costs of child care. Those tinkering tax measures would not create a single additional child care space.

For Quebec, O'Toole talked about helping low-income families pay for day care, without realizing that the Quebec program already waives the fees for low-income parents. Liberal leader Justin Trudeau hammered O'Toole on that point, and the Conservative did not have much of a rejoinder.

A cluttered debate with few chances for robust exchanges on policy

The huge gulf between the Conservatives and all other parties on child care was the most significant take-away of the evening, which had few other revealing moments.

Sadly, the debate's format was far too cluttered to allow for much coherent discourse and discussion.

The debate featured questions from two moderators, from a handful of notionally ordinary Canadians in different locations, and from a series of journalists who trotted on and off the stage like actors handing out Academy awards.

The moderators seemed mostly preoccupied with time. They would frequently turn to one or other of the leaders and remind them that they had 45 seconds to deal with massive and complex issues of public policy such as regulating and funding long-term care.

In fairness, a number of the questions were excellent and on point, especially from the ordinary Canadians. Some, however, from both the professionals and the selected Canadians, were at least a bit out of left field.

It took forever, for instance, to get to Indigenous issues. And when they finally did, the questioner -- Perry Simon, a Mohawk from Kanestake, near Montreal -- asked the leaders if they favoured bestowing official status on the languages of Canada's First Nations.

That is an interesting idea. But it is hardly the most pressing for most Indigenous communities, which are dealing with land issues, the ongoing denial of their rights to natural resources, and service delivery failures in health care, education and even the most basic service of all, drinking water.

NDP leader Jagmeet Singh answered Simon's question in the affirmative but then pivoted to those more urgent matters.

The NDP leader hammered on the water issue, pointing out, as he has in the past, that when the government has the will to mobilize its resources in a crisis such as that brought on by COVID-19, it can turn on a dime. Ergo the problem with First Nations water is not one of resources; it is one of political will.

Trudeau was defensive on drinking water but could point out that, although the government has not achieved its goal of providing safe water for all, it has eliminated boil water advisories in over 100 First Nations' communities.

There was an amusing moment when O'Toole greeted Simon with the Anishinaabe word for thank you, Miigwech. The correct Mohawk expression for thank you is Niá:wen.

Long-term care finally gets onto the agenda

One of the most pertinent questions of the evening came from seniors' advocate Bernadette Landry of New Brunswick. She asked about the treatment of the elderly and the crisis in long-term care.

Landry asked: "The pandemic opened our eyes to the mistreatment and neglect of the elderly. The provinces have not done their part. What will you, as prime minister, do to make sure the provinces better protect the elderly?"

O'Toole talked about the six per cent annual increases his party has promised for health care. He added, however, that he would "respect provincial jurisdiction". We can assume the Conservatives would not favour national standards for long term care.

Trudeau talked about hiring 50,000 more workers for long-term care facilities, without details, and said, again without being specific, that the "federal government has a role to play in long-term care."

Blanchet took umbrage at the very idea that another government might know better than Quebec's how to manage and regulate long term care in that province, despite the high death toll in Quebec facilities for the elderly Quebec during the pandemic.

In a moving personal moment, the Greens' Annamie Paul mentioned that her own father died in long-term care during the darkest days of the pandemic.

Both Paul and the NDP's Singh advocated for applying the principles and conditions of the Canada Health Act to long-term care. That would mean there be national standards to accompany additional federal money.

Singh talked about the motion his party presented to parliament last spring to abolish profit in long term care facilities and transform all for-profit facilities to not-for-profit ones by 2030.

The New Democrat pointed out that both Trudeau and O'Toole voted against that motion.

Many studies have shown how disease and death in private long-term care facilities was far worse than in not-for-profit or public ones during the COVID-19 crisis. As well, Canada's record of mortality in long-term care during the pandemic was the worst by far, among developed countries. And yet, the treatment of the elderly has not been a significant issue during this campaign.

Climate change is an afterthought

The debate was almost over when we got to the existential issue of our time, climate change, in the form of a question from an 11-year-old Charles Leduc from Saint-Clet, Quebec.

Both O'Toole and Singh knocked Trudeau for failing to reach his own greenhouse gas reduction targets over the past six years.

O'Toole was on shaky ground, however, because he is late to the climate-change game. The Conservative leader only unveiled his greenhouse gas reduction policy last spring, and his party is probably not even behind him on it. Conservatives voted against a motion recognizing climate change as a reality at their most recent convention.

Annamie Paul and Jagmeet Singh both want to aim for much higher greenhouse gas reduction targets than the Liberals. To achieve those more robust targets, Singh proposes ending all subsidies to oil and gas companies and increasing the carbon tax on big industrial polluters.

Some economists say the latter move would be disastrous for the economy. Indeed, some have given poor marks to the NDP climate change program because, they say, it is unrealistically ambitious. Worse, those experts add, if a government were to implement NDP policies they would cause a significant and unacceptably steep decline in economic growth.

Trudeau cited those experts in defending his government's both-the-economy-and-the-environment approach.

As with other other subjects the leaders addressed, there was too little time during this debate for any kind of serious exchange or discussion on climate change.

Who is the real Quebecker?

The media are all unanimous that the most prickly exchange of the entire debate came when Blanchet turned a conversation about Indigenous rights to the rights of Quebec.

The Bloc leader asked Trudeau: "If you will not tell First Nations what to do and what to think why do you tell the Quebec Nation what to do and what to think?"

Trudeau channelled his father here and took extreme umbrage at Blanchet's arrogance in claiming he alone speaks for and represents Quebec. As did his father on many occasions, Trudeau proclaimed himself to be a proud Quebecker, who has as much right so speak about

and for Quebec as the Bloc leader.

Indeed, as it stands now there are many more Quebec members of parliament in Trudeau's party than Blanchet's. The Liberal leader hopes to keep it that way on September 20.

The English debate tonight will focus on many of the same topics as the French, with a similar format.

Let's hope the leaders get a little more time to formulate appropriately nuanced answers to complex questions.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: federal election ^[4]

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