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Fixed election date eroding campaign rules, ex-elections chief says

'The prime minister is the champ and his people are setting the rules,' says Jean-Pierre Kingsley

By Katharine Starr, CBC News Posted: May 23, 2015 7:00 AM ET | Last Updated: May 23, 2015 7:00 AM ET



Jean-Pierre Kingsley, former chief electoral officer, is calling for the creation of an independent elections commissioner to oversee and organize federal leaders' debates. (Sean Kilpatrick/Canadian Press)

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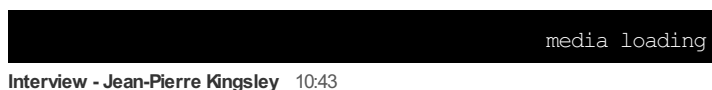
Canada's former chief electoral officer sees a new pre-campaigning style emerging thanks to Canada's first fixed-date election this fall, with recent conflict over leaders' debates just one consequence of the new system.

"The prime minister is the champ and his people are setting the rules. I think every Canadian should be concerned about that," Jean-Pierre Kingsley, former head of Elections Canada, told host Evan Solomon in an interview on CBC Radio's *The House*.

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"What I'm watching right now is a champion boxer establishing the ground rules under which he will participate in another championship fight," he added. "And we know that the champion has the upper hand."

In the past, elections occurred at least once every five years, and campaign periods were at least 36 days in length, although some ran as long as 60 days. The limited campaign time frame and rules on spending and government advertising were important controls on politicians, said Kingsley, drawing a contrast to this year's election, expected on Oct. 19.



Interview - Jean-Pierre Kingsley 10:43

"During an election campaign, the 36 days the campaign is on, the

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Must Watch

parties can only spend so much, approximately \$20 million," he said.

"Candidates can only spend up to about \$80,000. But if they're allowed to start campaigning before the official start of the campaign now, then what they're doing is spending more money. Who's favoured by this? The people with more money."

Level playing field

The result, in Kingsley's opinion?

"Eventually what we're going to see is the erosion of the financial controls that Canada has been developing over several generations," he said.

"When we lose the financial controls, we lose the ability to maintain what we call the level playing field, which is at the very core of our electoral act."

Election debates are another problem, Kingsley said.

Kingsley is calling for the establishing of an independent regulator — an elections debate commissioner — to act as a watchdog who would consult with the parties and work with traditional and emerging media to determine the number and nature of the debates.

"It would get that out of the direct hands of the politicians [...] and keep one thing in mind: the overarching concern with the public good," Kingsley said.

"What we're seeing here is the rules being changed by one party, and we know which party that is," he said.

"Really, what we're begging for is the recognition that we're going to have to put this in the hands of an independent person to make these very important decisions."

The debate over debates

Conservative spokesperson Kory Teneycke defended his party's position on the debates in a separate panel discussion on *The House* with New Democrat and Liberal representatives.

"Let's not confuse the way it's been done in the past as being a formal process," Teneycke said. "There's maybe a tradition around it, but there's no body in Canada in the past that looked at this."



Debate - Kory Teneycke, Anne McGrath, and Rob Silver 14:33

"To try and characterize it, as some have, as abandoning some sort of legitimate process to the Wild West, I'm not sure that's true."

The Conservatives and NDP have agreed to an English-language debate hosted by Maclean's/Rogers and a French debate hosted by TVA.

The Conservatives this week accepted invitations to two additional debates: one focusing on economic issues hosted by The Globe and Mail and Google and streamed online; and a debate on Canadian foreign policy to be held under the Munk Debates banner.

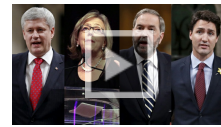
The NDP has signalled its willingness to attend these debates as well, while the Liberals have not made their intentions known. The Greens and the Bloc Québécois were not invited to those two debates.

The three national broadcasters, along with several social media partners, announced a deal this week with the opposition parties for two debates, one in English and one in French.

The Conservatives rejected that offer but are expected to announce one additional French-language debate in the next few days.



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Sunday Scrum: Federal politics

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The NDP rolls out new ads across the country, Brian Mulroney compliments Tom Mulcair and there's a debate over federal debates



Ireland turns out in close vote on same sex marriage

3:00

Polls leading up to the vote suggested the Yes side was in the lead, but the gap appears to have narrowed



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10:27

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May 23, 2015 2:01 PM

This week on The House, Evan Solomon talks with the Parliamentary Secretary to Defence Minister James Bezan about Canada's strategy after recent setbacks in the war against ISIS. Then, the former head of Elections Canada, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, argues that having a fixed election date is turning Canadian politics into a dangerous system of endless campaigns.




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