

Can TVO's 'Political Blind Date' help soften partisanship in Canada?

The TV show gives politicians the rare chance to talk outside of a hostile question period and get to the bottom of the seldom-answered question: (bleep) does that person think that way?

by Jason Markusoff Jan 16, 2020



Ontario Liberal MPP Michael Coteau (right) and Quebec CAQ MNA Christopher Skeete (left) discuss Quebec's Bill 21 for TVO's television show Political Blind Date (Photo by Ayala)

The morning after Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer announced he was resigning, former MP Lisa Raitt received a phone call from an unknown number. She'd run for party leadership in 2017, and speculation about her repeat candidacy was swirling anew. "This is not a Conservative calling you to run," said the caller in a jovial Prince Edward Island lilt. "It's me, calling to wish you and Bruce the best. Merry Christmas."

The well-wisher was MP Wayne Easter. A loyal Liberal soldier since 1993, Easter is not in the habit of phoning Opposition politicians; an exception. After more than a decade of poking and parrying across the House of Commons floor, the two veteran politicians came together 10 years ago for a platonic date, chaperoned by a TV documentary crew. They've been friends ever since. Easter was one of the first to call Raitt after she lost her Ontario seat in the fall election. Raitt's been quietly rooting for Easter to break into Justin Trudeau's cabinet.

Canada begins a new decade with partisanship entering overdrive at seemingly every level of government, with vituperative sound bites amplified on social media. TVOntario's *Political Blind Date* swims nobly against this current. Entering its third season, the show brings politicians from rival factions to explore a divisive issue over the course of a two-day "date." Each half-hour episode delves extensively and amicably more so than explosively—into some of Canada's diceiest subjects: legal cannabis, carbon taxes, asylum-seekers. The idea behind the program-cum-sociopolitical experiment is that if you remove two rivals from the bang-bang heckle-palooza of question period, they can talk to each other as human beings, even while vehemently disagreeing.

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The time shared away from Parliament's klieg lights tends to allow for the forging of bonds between each episode's pair. Though some colleagues may tut-tut, left- and right-leaning pols emerge from the taping seeing in the other a fellow parent or dedicated solution-seeker. They likely bring that respect for a counterpart back into the policy-making chamber. And while neither may win an argument or change their minds at the date's end, they may at least have gotten to the bottom of the often-asked, seldom-answered political question: Why the (bleep) does that person think that way?

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The show first aired in late 2017, with Liberal MP Nathaniel Erskine-Smith and Conservative MP Garnett Genuis debating cannabis legalization. Three seasons in, producers have stuck with their day one formula for episodes. Viewers get to know each politician's background through a narrator's overview of the issue, then the pair meets at a café for chit-chat and to begin discussing the assigned topic. Then, one politician goes on a "date" to see places and meet people that help argue their position. Genuis, who opposes legalization, took Erskine-Smith to a cannabis dispensary and to meet someone who's struggled with cannabis dependency. Erskine-Smith's date was to a well-secured and professional cannabis growing facility. For their episode on taxes in Season 2, Easter brought Raitt to a P.E.I. potato plant that receives federal economic development funds and to meet a young mother who loves the Canada child benefit, while Raitt introduced Easter to small-business owner Milton, Ont., who bemoans the burden and complications of the Trudeau government's business tax reforms.



Wayne Easter and Lisa Raitt. (Courtesy of PBD Productions)

Raitt says the taping made her realize how "really smart" a politician Easter is, after a decade working across the aisle from him; Easter is marvelling at how much his Conservative counterpart's constituents admired their MP. One of them is now out of office, but they remember. They know, too, that Canadian politics needs more collegiality, especially now that minority government is back, necessitating collaborative parties. "If there was ever, ever a time we need a coming together of the system, it is now," Easter says. "Canadians sent us a message: 'I'm not going to give any of you guys complete control. We want you to work together.'"

To segue into the "date" part of each episode, the narrator says the blind daters "are spending the day together: rare for rival politician heads, or might they find common ground?" Spoiler: in most episodes, the answers are no and no—they disagree congenially, but generate their respective party's policy guns.

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The first part of the narrator's statement, meanwhile, is astonishingly relevant in modern politics. "MPs don't usually get a chance to sit down with some of the other members [outside] the chamber, when they're barking at each other during question period," says Paul Thomas, senior researcher at the Samara Centre for Democracy. They run into each other in airport terminals, check emails and texts next to each other on Parliament Hill, and mingle at the occasional cocktail reception, but that's about it. Long gone, Easter says, are the days when erstwhile opponents would have dinner together after a combative day, something he experienced during his earlier days in the House, in the 1990s and early 2000s. The closure of Hy's Steakhouse in 2016 left Ottawa without a main all-party watering hole, Raitt notes. After the previous election, the Samara Centre conducted exit interviews with dozens of departing MPs. They bemoaned far-reaching toxic partisanship enforced by leaders' staff and the way party leaders engenders absolute team solidarity. One solution, ex-MPs say, is to create more spaces for cross-partisan interactions, either on the Hill or during committee travel, when, after long days away from party whips (and leaders' aides), MPs can dine and fraternize. Take rivals outside the confrontational context, and the attack-mode switch tends to flip off, party lines drop away and overall hostility declines, Thomas says. "It's important to humanize the interactions a fair bit."

Which helps in a culture that dehumanizes rivals, or reduces them to caricatures. In Season 2, Episode 12, which aired this past March MP Pierre Paul-Hus spent two days with Liberal Rob Oliphant on a “date” about border and refugee claimants. They were vehemently migrant issue, so much so that Oliphant joked about needing a martini instead of a coffee. But they drove around Quebec and Toronto strapped on skates to play hockey with a group of young refugees; after two days, each sees the other as more than “just” a foot soldier side. “He’s a very good man,” said Paul-Hus of Oliphant. “Before this, for me, [he] was just a Liberal.”



Pierre Paul-Hus and Rob Oliphant. (Courtesy of PBD Productions)

Erskine-Smith and Genuis, a Toronto Liberal and an Alberta Conservative, had interacted a bit before shooting their episode. But, they found common cause as parents in their early 30s. Now, Erskine-Smith says, “I am more comfortable sitting next to him and chatting the day.” They’re not working together on pot policy, but have found cross-aisle agreements on human rights files like the Rohingya in Burma. During an emergency debate after their taping, Genuis praised the Liberal’s thoughtfulness, and Erskine-Smith commended his “vocal advocacy on this file.”

While municipal councils lack parties in most Canadian cities, that doesn’t mean they lack the factions and partisan distance other levels of government have. In the Season 3 premiere (which will air in late January), Toronto councillors Shelley Carroll and Gary Crawford met as a progressive and a fiscal hawk debating civic revenue sources. Viewers quickly learn that, after nine years of sitting together on council, they actually know each other. Carroll has long been open that raising a daughter with special needs motivated her to enter politics. Over the course of the episode, Crawford reveals a parallel story: his daughter was born 16 weeks premature, and lives with cerebral palsy. This revelation gave Carroll a new perspective, she says in the episode. “That blew me away because we’d been sitting on council for two terms by then. I never knew any of that,” she says. When Crawford was first elected in 2010 alongside then-mayor Rob Ford, the veteran Carroll made a point of booking lunches with a few colleagues; she met briefly with Crawford and a few others before Ford’s staff began cracking down on his allies who were associating with him, she recalls.

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In Ottawa, Conservative natural resources critic Shannon Stubbs is known for her aggressiveness in question period; it’s a key reason she’s on the show, she admits. The rural Albertan’s blind date was with Arthur Potts (Season 1, Episode 6), a now-former Ontario MPP who has argued for higher taxes and a speedy phase-out on fossil fuel production. Yet they had clear on-air chemistry. “Her pictures don’t do her justice on their own. She’s a young, pretty dynamic woman and full of energy,” Potts says during the show. “He’s very likable, with his bright blue eyes and his smile. He tells the camera, “But his policy positions are a threat to the livelihoods of the people I represent.”

In the House, Stubbs channels her constituents' anger toward Liberal Ottawa, but she self-defines as bubbly, chatty and affable. She's with opposing MPs she's met in the women's washroom, and trusts Erskine-Smith enough that she asked him if she should be wary of producers' biases. (Answer: no.) To gain multi-party support for a motion on rural crime, she often crossed the Commons lobby to speak—with NDP members. Fellow Tories jabbed her for this. "When I would go back to our side of the lobby, some of the guys are like, 'Uh doing over there?'" Stubbs recalls. They also pestered her about doing *Blind Date*, saying she'd never get those two days back. A couple notes, have since gone on the show, or plan to.

Political Blind Date was inspired by a 2015 British newspaper series of the same name. The *Guardian's* print feature sent MPs from rival parties to coffee and follow-up interviews. Tom Powers, a Toronto-based producer, saw a seed for a documentary series. "I thought the timing was something like this to highlight that in a toxic political world, if you put two people together for a little bit of time, they might actually connect with each other," he says. Powers reached out to director Mark Johnston and producer Amanda Handy. They shopped the concept around—but TVO bit—and Johnston leaned on connections to wrangle political guinea pigs for the first installments. Episode 2, about transit, a coup, bringing together Jagmeet Singh and Doug Ford when they were an Ontario NDP backbencher and former city councillor, respectively. The show aired in late 2017, weeks after Singh became a federal party leader; months later, Ford became Ontario premier.) This decidedly quick chemistry as they counted streetcar passengers and pedal-tested Toronto bicycle lanes. Singh opens the episode noting colleague that being seen with Ford would be harmful to his image, but ends saying he'd happily hang out with him again. Ford says he connects immediately, "and how can you not with Jagmeet?" Ford has since said few nice words about an Ontario NDPer, though his amiability offers a preview of his recent turn as a nice-guy unifier.



Jagmeet Singh and Doug Ford. (Darren Goldstein)

The show has averaged 195,000 viewers per episode, solid numbers for TVO. It's renewed for a fourth season. "We see this is as a signal," says John Ferri, vice-president of current affairs and documentaries. Producers have optioned the series for potential versions in the U.S., South Africa, Spain and Israel, and discussed Australian and U.S. versions. In almost every case, the dating pair from TVO's series has stayed together as friends and colleagues since taping. "I hope the audience appreciates that, too: that *PBD* gives them politicians debating the most important issues without the inflamed rhetoric plaguing political discourse," Johnston says. "We can disagree, but let's at least know our opponents are

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Some politicians chafe at media for overlooking the bulk of their agreements. "On maybe 90 per cent of the points, we agree and we disagree," Paul-Hus says. "But nobody wants to talk about it, because this is not interesting." Along with others, he says question period is a theatre; the real collaborative work goes on in parliamentary committees. But even then, MPs take time out of earnest discussion to score points and recite talking points. During the most-watched committee of 2019—hearings into the SNC-Lavalin affair—Liberals rallied behind the leadership, and Conservatives swapped out regular committee members for the sniping likes of Pierre Poilievre. "The more and more the community room, the worse it is going to be," Thomas says. "There is this instinct to perform, and parties want to make sure they get their messages across."

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And while media may earn their lumps for overlooking co-operation because it generates less sexy headlines than conflict, you know how to avoid MP co-operation and to exaggerate and promote every finger-wagging rant? The parties themselves. They're in the business of themselves and tearing down the other guys—beyond being a dull headline, co-operating is deadly for fundraising.

“You want whatever will compel your members and activists to contribute the most to the party,” Stubbs says. “I don't even know if there's an institutional fix. What are the mechanisms to enable or accommodate that?”

It's one thing to recognize that your political rival isn't a partisan automaton; it's another to cede an inch on your party's stance on an issue that seldom happens on *Political Blind Date*. Its premise makes policy debate a tug-of-war contest, a lengthy promotion of each side's talking points by politicians like the show for that very reason). The next step, actually listening and compromising, is likely beyond the scope of 30 minutes.

In the current climate, it's up to individual MPs to step over party lines and ignore their allies' sneers. Minority government seems designed to discourage bridge-building, but narrow margins for House votes often mean committees leave the Ottawa bubble less often, and the threat of government falling on a confidence vote can also raise pressure to be loyal to one's own ranks. “So much depends on culture change and a willingness of parliamentarians to go on a show like this is important,” Erskine-Smith says. He notes that Canadians often say they want politics actually working to find solutions. “The show provides glimpses of what that could look like. And the show is popular as a result. There's one thing that readily gets politicians' attention, it's stuff that is popular.



Student-Teacher Zainab Qasimi speaks with MNA Christopher Skeete and MPP Michael Coteau in a classroom at the Glendon Campus of York University in Toronto (Photo by Jalani Morgan)

At a bagel café in Laval, Que.: Michael Coteau and Christopher Skeete are chewing over hijabs and secularism. The show hasn't been unpacking controversial issues, and this episode of Season 4, now in production, is about one of Canada's most intractable—Bill 21, that bans teachers, prosecutors and judges from wearing hijabs, turbans or other religious symbols, a law that is overwhelmingly popular and despised by politicians elsewhere.

Skeete, the Quebec premier's parliamentary secretary, relishes the chance to get more than 14 seconds to explain to Ontarians why Quebec's religious attire on public servants. “I have no doubt in people's individual morality or honesty. But I have an issue with perceived conflicts that arise,” he tells his date, suggesting that religious attire clashes with Quebec's doctrine of state secularism and neutrality. Coteau, an MPP with the Ontario Liberal leadership, championed a unanimously approved motion at Queen's Park, pledging his province would never adopt the bill. Between sips of coffee, he maintains a skeptical gaze as Skeete talks about Quebecers worrying about the promotion of religion by autocrats. “That's interesting,” Coteau says repeatedly. “It's almost discrimination fighting discrimination.” Talking points gradually melt away on the show. In two constituents who support the bill, both visible minorities. The talk gets intense, but never combative. During a break in the filming, Coteau muses about asking TVO for an hour-long slot for this episode. In the Toronto segment of the date, Coteau introduces Skeete to a hijab-wearing teacher and a turban-wearing constable. Skeete proves calm and inscrutable. Afterwards, he is confident he at least proved to his Ontario

he is not a swingout
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READ: *The battle against Quebec's Bill 21*

Do they come together on this issue? No. But they do emerge with a better understanding of the other side, and each other. Coteau and Johnston had one Black parent from the Caribbean, and the other white—though growing up as a mixed-race kid is different in Toronto than it is in the town of Quebec. “I wonder what our lives would have been like if I grew up in his part of Quebec and he grew up here—would my views be different?” Coteau says in his post-date interview.

“I don’t know if you noticed, but there was a lot of nodding going on,” Skeete observes. “So we weren’t that far off on our ideal of what a society should be. Now, of course, the means [to get there] . . . we are not in the same place.”

They end their date on a chilly afternoon at a commuter train station in Laval, where they flag down an Egyptian immigrant; he explains the importance of Bill 21 putting everyone on the same level field. It might not have been what the Ontarian wanted to hear, but this show is political reality TV. These two politicians strongly disagree on this matter, but they can see other areas where they and their provinces can work together on climate, infrastructure and economic development, for example—issues they casually discussed in between Bill 21 scenes.

It’s getting late. Johnston, the director, instructs the pair to say goodbye and walk in opposite directions. Coteau gently grimaces. “Aw, to walk opposite ways.”

This article appears in print in the February 2020 issue of Maclean’s magazine with the headline, “Hanging with the enemy.” [Subscribe to the magazine here.](#)

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