

## The Empire Club Presents



### **CANADA'S FRESH POLITICAL VOICES: A FEDERAL ELECTION PANEL FEATURING NEW INFLUENCERS**

Welcome Address, by Mr. Kent Emerson, Associate Vice President at the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation and President of the Empire Club of Canada

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May 22, 2019

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, members and guests. Welcome to the 115th season of the Empire Club of Canada. My name is Kent Emerson. I am the President of the Empire Club of Canada and your host for this evening featuring “Canada’s Fresh Political Voices,” the first in our federal election series. I would like to begin by offering thanks to our generous sponsor for this evening, Navigator.

Thanks, Navigator for sponsoring this, and also to the National Post and Toronto Sun, as our media partners, and also to mediaevents.ca for webcasting today’s event.

Without great sponsors like these, these events could not happen. We are also proud for a few special guests tonight. I know that the Ryerson Leadership Lab has sent some people out tonight. I know there are four or five. Why don’t you stand up? A round of applause for some students here that have come out tonight. I know that there are some Empire Club board members here. I am going to introduce Mike in a minute, but I see Antoinette here; I see Ziggy here. Anybody else tonight? Thank you guys for coming.

## **HEAD TABLE**

### **Distinguished Guest Speakers:**

Mr. Jeff Ballingall, Creator, Ontario Proud, BC Proud, and Canada Proud;  
Founder, Mobilize Media Group

Ms. Adrienne Batra, Editor-in-Chief, Toronto Sun

Ms. Jasmine Pickel, Interim Ontario Communications Director,  
Canadian Taxpayers Federation

Taylor Scollon, Co-Founder, North99

Mr. Rick Smith, Executive Director, Broadbent Institute

I just want to take a little bit of time to talk about our evening event series. It is something that started a couple of years ago by Paul Fogolin, who was the president then.

It has grown in popularity, grown in concept, and the whole idea here is we come out; we have a few drinks and eat a bit of food. Then, we do a presentation, and we have some fun. It is a little more off the cuff than our lunches that are more traditional for our audience. Then, we have some more drinks, and we have some more food, so do not go anywhere when this is over. No one is kicking you out.

It is a networking event on purpose. You can tell the nanny or whoever is at home, “I am staying out; we are having fun with the Empire Club.”

We have some more great events this season. I will mention them at the end of the evening. I also thought it would be appropriate to introduce Mike Van Soelen tonight to explain, first of all, why we have gathered here, the purpose of this event. There are two reasons. One is that Mike has organized this event. The second is Mike is nominated as President for the next season of the Empire Club, which begins in September. Provided the board members here do not vote against the committee’s recommendation, because there is always this matter of democracy, which gets in the way of things, then Mike will be the next president.

I am sure many of you know him. You know him from journalism. You may know him from politics. Maybe you know him from his life in public relations or his opinions on TV and radio, which I strongly disagree with. I just wanted

to mention. I think this is a good time to bring it up.

I have gotten to know Mike over the year. What I can say about him is he is a really great guy, and he is thoughtful in the way he puts ideas together. Putting this event together is one of those examples of that.

I am really looking forward to Mike in succeeding me in all kinds of different ways. Please, welcome the Third Vice President of the Empire Club of Canada and Managing Principal at Navigator, the next president of the Empire Club, Mike Van Soelen.

## **Introduction, by Mr. Mike Van Soelen, Third Vice President, Empire Club of Canada**

Thanks, Kent for the very kind words. It will be exciting and a little nervous to follow in Kent's footsteps. He has been a fabulous president of the Empire Club.

Thanks, again, for the kind words. Good evening, everybody. I see a lot of familiar faces here. That is exciting for us. I know it is going to be a great event. We are here to talk about a pretty important issue, but I was going to begin by talking about something else that I think is important, and that is the Game of Thrones finale from earlier this week.

I assume you guys are all caught up on the finale, and it certainly seems as though everyone has watched it. It is the talk of the office. We hear it on social media. Certainly, bar-

rels of ink have been spilled talking about whether the finale stacked up or it did not.

It seems to have been a cultural moment, I suppose, for a generation. Actually, the Game of Thrones only achieved 19 million viewers. That might sound like a lot, but it is really not. That tells us an important fact about the fragmentation of media today. I think it tells us it is an important context for the discussion that we are about to have this evening.

I would like to myth-bust about the Game of Thrones a little bit, in part, because I am not one of those people who has ever seen an episode of Game of Thrones, which Adrienne has bugged me about before. I know the HBO executives were happy with it. We heard about that.

I think the fact that they marked it as a success sort of speaks to how hard it is to engage and get eyeballs today versus how it used to be. When you consider 15 years ago Friends and its season finale, you will find that the Game of Thrones got only a third of the eyeballs that Friends did 15 years ago.

Then, they only got 87 million less than M\*A\*S\*H did 35 years ago. M\*A\*S\*H's season finale was the high-water mark. No one has ever surpassed it as far as the number of eyeballs that there were. Of course, they achieved that number in a pool of people that was much smaller than what there is today.

I expect, at the time M\*A\*S\*H's finale was out there, it felt like everybody had seen the show, but the fact was that then, everybody did see the show, unlike with the Game of Thrones, where we live in a different world.

Tonight's panel is about politics. It is about the way political conversations are going to unfold in the next federal election. I make the point about Game of Thrones because, just like the entertainment industry has changed, the news industry is changing as well.

People are getting their information from evermore diverse sources. Politicians cannot count on Canadians all tuning in to CBC, The National, each evening, to get information about the day's events and the day's activities in Ottawa.

Of course, this has huge implications for political parties. It has huge implications for elections and, in some ways, it has implications for the workings of democracy itself.

In all that change, there is also opportunity. I think it is that opportunity that tonight's panel can speak most succinctly to. If there is a common theme among their panelists, it is that they are all pioneers in navigating these fragmented audiences, the different tribes, and in using different platforms and tools to engage and reach Canadians across the country. Let us get to our panel and get the discussion started. I want to start by introducing the folks here.

First, we have, on the far left, Jeff Ballingall, a good friend, creator of Ontario Proud, BC Proud and Canada Proud as well.

He is producing some of the fastest-growing and most engaged content in the country today. He is the owner, importantly, of Mobilize Media Group, and he is doing great work. Sitting to his right is Taylor Scollon.

He is the co-founder of North99, a progressive, independent advocacy group that reaches of millions of folks. Next, we have Jasmine Pickel, who joins us form the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. She is the Interim Ontario Communications Director. The CTF has long been a force in Canadian politics, a savvy group that understands how to engage with Canadians. I am very pleased that she can join us tonight.

Next, we have Rick Smith, author, friend, nonprofit leader. He is the Executive Director of the Broadbent Institute, and he has overseen the organization's push in new media with PressProgress.

Rick also knows me as long as anyone in this room, and he can remember the days when I had long hair and was beating around doing my undergrad.

Also, a super-smart guy. He did really important work around plastics and BPA. I think we all owe him gratitude for that advocacy work.

Finally, our distinguished moderator, a good friend, Adrienne Batra, at one time Director of Communications to Rob Ford, is Editor-in-Chief of the Toronto Sun. The queen of all media, the incomparable, Adrienne Batra, let me turn it over to you.

## **Panel Discussion: Canada's Fresh Political Voices, Moderated by Ms. Adrienne Batra**

AB: Good evening to all of you. I realize that we are here after a long weekend, and it is kind of terrible weather outside. Being away from your family and then having a long day at work is perhaps not necessarily the place you want to be as out and about. We promise to engage you, invigorate you and, hopefully, give you a few things to walk away with, a little bit of food for thought. Welcome, and thank you to the Empire Club for hosting this event here. A special welcome to our friends Rick and Taylor and to the Albany Club.

Maybe you will find the sacrificial rooms upstairs. I cannot imagine that you are in this club very often, but, welcome, nonetheless. Irony was not lost on me. Jeff Ballingall is sitting to my left. This is an important conversation that we are having in this country and on this stage this evening in front of all of you.

If anybody knows about being disrupted in the media industry, it is I, in the newspaper business. We are sitting with four individuals here who are prepared and have been engaged in disrupting in a sort of political establishment in their own way. With all of that and in that context, they come from different sort of political ideologies and philosophies, even though none of them directly belong to a political party. We will dive into that right away. I am going to start on my left with



you, Mr. Ballingall. Please, for any of the panelists, feel free to jump in. Just a housekeeping note: Ladies and gentlemen, we will take questions from you, if time remains, so just jot something down. I believe someone will pick up a note from you. If you have a question you would like to ask to the panelists, I will endeavour to get it to you. If you want to follow us along on social media, it is #empireclub. Very easy.

It is right there. Jeff Ballingall, I used the term ‘disrupter’ when I first started talking about all four of you.

Do you view yourself as a disrupter in terms of a media company, social media, partisan, political?

How do you view what Ontario Proud has done, and, now, ultimately, going into a federal election, what Canada Proud will do?

JB: I certainly think we do. Our work is certainly disrupting a lot of people, a lot of mainstream political parties, a lot of mainstream politicians, mainstream publications. People are hungry for something new and different. Finally, because of social media, we are able to do and say things that others cannot, not just in our tone of content, but in our ability to just get our message out. Twenty years ago, 30 years ago, if you wanted to reach millions of people, you had to have a printing press or TV station. When I started Ontario Proud, I started it with no money. I started it with memes and links and jokes and videos, and, sudden-

ly, because we are talking about an issue that really resonated at the time, which was hydro prices in this province, our message grew like wildfire. Things are changing every day with Facebook's algorithm.

It is harder and harder to start something new. I was lucky. I did it at a time where you had that ability, but we are doing something that is different. We are reaching a ton of people in a time where traditional media is declining, if not collapsing. Our message works because it resonates. People like what we are doing.

Some people really hate it, but enough people really like it that it works. I feel like what we are doing is very disruptive, and we are going to be continuing to do so.

AB: Taylor, North99, the organization that you are with is described as a not-for-profit, progressive-content and opinion organization with the goal of shifting public opinion and making Canada a more fair and inclusive country. You are non-partisan, and you do not endorse political parties, per se. However, you do have a particular political side of the spectrum that you intend to support. I want to pose a similar question to you.

As an advocacy organization, how have you viewed the traditional media? But going into this, and part of the premise of why we are here is that we are going into the next federal election. How do you anticipate

your organization injecting itself and still maintaining the core values and principles that you have?

TS: Our mission is really to shift opinion in a progressive direction. Like you said, we are a broadly progressive organization. The way I describe it to people is that our goal is to expand the boundaries on the left of what is politically viable and politically possible. We do that in a variety of ways, many of which Jeff also does with his Proud network pages, and in other ways, too, by doing polling that talks about issues that people are not necessarily discussing in the discourse. We did, I think, the first poll in Canada on the Green New Deal, for example. Now, that is something that is being talked about more and more. I think we have a role to play in expanding the boundaries of what the political parties can talk about because we can say things and do things that they are not able to yet.

AB: Jasmine, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation has been around for a very long time. It is an organization that I am quite familiar with, having been the former Manitoba director. One of the things that has always knocked against the CTF is that you are just ostensibly a shell and an arm for the Conservative Party and any rightwing political party. I would always counter that by saying, “No, we are equal opportunity flamethrowers; it does not matter who is in power,” and I like to say that about the Toronto Sun, too, sometimes.

I want to ask you: I know that you are new in this role as the Ontario director, but you now have some colleagues that are in the same space you are in now.

The CTF is infamous; we have all seen it, the debt clock that goes around across the country or around the province. How have you found the impact that your organization has made in either changing government policy or, frankly, changing a government?

JP: The CTF has been extremely impactful. I think, in election campaigns, we tend to get swept away with these grandiose ideas that sound wonderful, in theory, but no one can afford. As you mentioned, I am the Ontario director, so that involves specifically holding Doug Ford to account. This was a government that came in saying that there was respect for taxpayers and, yet, we see that the budget in Ontario is not going to be balanced until after the end of his mandate.

Very convenient. Likewise, we are the largest sub-national debtor. There is a lot of work to be done. I would say that the CTF is the voice of reason, really, in an election campaign. Our debt clock really does bring that conversation of just what is reasonable, what can we afford, back into the conversation before we all get swept away with all different political promises.

AB: Rick, my question is going to be very similar to you with the Broadbent Institute. Notice how we did this

left, right, left, right. We planned it that way. Yes, it was a little bit planned that way. The Broadbent Institute not only engages in the political discourse, but you actively go out, and you commission studies and reports and research to buttress the policies that you would like governments to implement and employ.

Of course, Ed Broadbent was well known on what would be the left side of the political spectrum, but this is, again, an opportunity in this conversation that we are having right now, for your organization to be part of significant change. How do you see your role versus, say Jeff Ballingall's role, for example?

RS: We are right, and Jeff is wrong, for starters. If I can just take a second, I just wanted to thank you very much. I turned fifty last year, and you have deemed us the 'fresh political voices' here. I just wanted to thank the Empire Club very much, because I tell my kids all the time that I am not that old.

AB: Fifty is the new thirty.

RS: The Empire Club has now confirmed that for my children, so I really appreciate that. We do a few things at the Broadbent Institute. We really do three things. We try to pump out good policy ideas, both proactively and reactively, trying to go toe-to-toe with dumb Conservative ideas. We do a lot of training of up-and-coming leaders across the country, and then we run

PressProgress as an online daily newsroom. It is a little newsroom. It has a morning meeting every day.

We try to pump out good news stories. More than anything, we are in the ideas business. Like a lot of folks on this stage, we have a different role to play in the political process. We are not really interested so much in the news cycle of the moment. We try to take a longer view and try to make sure our ideas gain traction over the longer term.

AB: Why not just be a part of the NDP? Why not just be part of a political party? Same question to all of you, actually, but I will let you go first, Rick.

RS: We have a different role to play. We are in the ideas business as opposed to the getting-people-elected business. I think there is a real need for that. Frankly, we were set up seven years ago. As Canadian progressives, we came late to the game. There is a long tradition of cross-issue, progressive policy organizations in the U.S., not so much in Canada. The conservative movement, to its credit, really got ahead of us.

The Fraser Institute, founded in the 1970s—the Manning Centre. We are, of course the Fraser Institute for good, not evil. We were late to the game, but we have been trying to catch up. We can go toe-to-toe with conservatives and conservative-movement organizations in a way that the political parties cannot and

engage in that daily combat of ideas in a way that political parties cannot.

AB: Jeff, our friend Rick here has taken a lot of shots at the centre-right, the conservative movement. I think you would be, arguably, the most representative in terms of an organization that is helping the conservative movement through the things that you are doing. Do you find, though, that you are piercing through versus what the extreme left at the Ed Broadbent Institute is doing?

JB: I think so. I think a lot of people are in a Toronto-centric, Ottawa-centric bubble, and when I try to talk about politics, I always try to talk about politics in a way that my aunt would understand, so *[I use language that is]* simplified, accessible, digestible, relevant, relatable.

We try to mix up our tone, too. We do not just want to be angry. We do not just want to be shocked. We do not want to be just disgusted. We try to use humour.

We do not want to be just the drunk uncle at the dinner table. We talk about a litany of issues beyond just politics and try to inject culture. We want to bring in people into the conversation and then try to influence their opinion on Justin Trudeau or, in the past, Kathleen Wynne, in different ways. We are always testing what works and what does not. The beauty of social media is that it is an instant focus group. You know instantly what works and instantly what does not.

That is the sort of thing that we are doing. We have to keep really abreast of what is going on with the tech giants and how their algorithms are constantly changing. Now, we also have to worry about a prime minister who is not the brightest, but he is smart enough to know that we pose a threat to him, and they are trying to, increasingly, throw a regulation on top of us that infringes on our right to free speech. We will see.

We are pretty nimble, and that is the beauty of what we are doing. We are small; we are mighty; and we are flexible. And we are able to keep on going no matter what they try to stop us with.

AB: I do want to talk a little bit about the Digital Charter that is coming up, in a moment. Taylor, with North99, it is newish, and you are just kind of coming up and trying new things. How have you found it? In the what we call legacy media, in the new media, in this new age, it is far easier, I think, to gain access to listeners, to readers, to people that will engage with you or with your platform. How do you guys at North99 engage with your viewers, your audience?

TS: I think there is actually a lot to what Jeff just said.

I think it is the reason why we started North99, which is because we saw that the right was dominating the online conversation. The newsfeed, social channels is where a lot of people get their news. It is the pri-



mary news source for a whole range of demographics now. We had just sort of abandoned the field to people like Jeff Ballingall, which is scary. I think there is something to be said about his insight, which is that these channels are conducive to groups that can speak in plain, ordinary language to people. That is how you reach large audiences on those channels. What we saw is that the left in Canada—but not just in Canada, really in a lot of western countries—has been speaking to an increasingly stratified, elite segment of the population. Because of that, it is not doing well on Facebook, WhatsApp, all these channels that people are getting their information from, and we want to change that. The way we approach it is by—I am proud to say I am a populist leftist—we speak in populist, ordinary language, and I think that is really what drives success and effectiveness on these channels.

AB: Just humour me. What exactly is a ‘populist leftist’?

TS: We believe, broadly, that the rules of our society have been constructed by a wealthy elite and probably many people who are members of this club. It is time that we take back control from those people and return it to ordinary people because that is what a healthy democracy looks like.

AB: I am glad you brought your own cheering section.

You needed backup coming into the Albany Club.

I can respect that. Jeff, one of my takeaways from that is he basically said you are a pioneer. That is helpful.

TS: Absolutely.

JB: I would actually say that Taylor and I—we are friends, socially, too—agree on a lot of issues. There are things about leftwing populism that I really like, that I think a lot of rightwing parties or the establishment in Canada will not talk about that I think are ripe to talk about.

I think when it comes to problems in our society, whether it is cell phone bills or airline tickets, sometimes the conversation is just not being had. Let us have the conversation; whether there are rightwing solutions or leftwing solutions to these things, we just talk about things. There are things that are just broken, I think, in Canada, and we are so complacent in this country that we just accept it. Union Station has been under construction for 15 years, and it is three years past its due date. No one talks about it; we just accept it. These are the sorts of things that—I just want to have the conversation about a lot of the issues that we are just not having. I credit, whether it is Bernie Sanders or Taylor Scollon, for always bringing some—Bernie Sanders is a bit better looking than Taylor.

AB: I agree with the notion that good public policy should not be isolated to one side of the political aisle.

Jasmine, I want to bring you back into this conversation because of the organization and the members that you represent, their supporters. This is where you guys try to be an advocate on both sides of what Jeff was talking about in terms of consumer protection, for example, or even what Taylor is referring to with holding governments accountable.

JP: It is interesting what you are saying, Taylor, about standing up for taking power back from the wealthy, but I would actually say that one of our most popular campaigns, at the moment, is against the carbon tax. That is simply by number of petition signatures.

I am from Southwestern Ontario, which is quite a rural area. I grew up on a farm. Back there, you do not hear the same support for these high taxation schemes that are really popular in urban centres, but they really do hurt a lot of people, the little guy that you are speaking of. In terms of connecting with our supporters, our donors, the biggest issue for them is the carbon tax, because, really, a tax is not a way to change the climate; it is just a scheme to put more money in government pockets. In terms of connecting with them, they are the ones signing these petitions; they are the ones really driving, pushing the needle on that cause.

AB: Rick, I know you are anxious to weigh in on some of the things that have already been said, so please, go ahead.

RS: I wanted to jump in on this notion of populism and what left populism is, what right populism is. I think one key difference is both the left and the right in the populist sphere, anyway, agree that there is a lot of economic angst that people are feeling at the moment. I think where the left and the right depart from each other, at the moment, is what to do about that and who to blame. You see an awful lot of, frankly, extremism in conservative politics these days in terms of pointing at immigrants, pointing at refugees.

Though I like some of what I see on Ontario Proud—I am all about beautiful Ontario waterfalls and the beauty of our countryside, which is a lot of your memes—there is a tendency in the conservative world these days to point fingers at people who are not responsible for the economic anxiety that other Canadians are feeling. The right these days is increasingly anti-pluralist, and the left is not. There is no symmetry in our political debate, at the moment. It is not like the right and the left are equally culpable for what is going on with politics, at the moment. That is a key difference I think in terms of what drives some of us on this stage.

AB: I will pivot from that then, and put this to you since we are having the conversation with respect to the economic accountability that we have seen. The right, the so-called right would argue that it is big-spending, left-

wing politicians whom you have backed, or for whom you would advocate—not you—but in general, big spending, big government, big deficits, big debt.

Where is the future accountability for taxpayers in the long term? To quote my friends at the CTF, “Today’s debts are tomorrow’s taxes.” Someone is eventually going to have to pay. This is the situation we find ourselves in, in Ontario and, ultimately, we will find ourselves in Canada in the coming years if they are not there already. How, then, do—? Pardon?

**Q: I said ‘Jesus Christ’. The amount of rhetoric here.**

AB: That is part of it.

**Q: I would love to see people talk about issues based on knowledge, facts and information as opposed to preconceived ideological positions. I cannot get that from the legacy media, and I do not do the hashtag stuff. I like to read.**

JB: That is all we do!

AB: That is part of the point, here, which is that these are the individuals that are actually making the impact and having that difference. We are more than happy to take questions from the audience in just a few short moments. Jeff, let me throw it to you, then. I gave my little preamble about the left: Big spending. The right wants to cut everything and, perhaps, are more critical

than necessary. How do you pierce through that? How do you pierce through just being a rightwing advocate?

JB: I think we want to talk about politics in a way that is digestible and relevant, something that is humorous. Things that do really well for us are motives.

When Justin Trudeau is really hypocritical, when he talks about climate change and the need to put a price on pollution, and then he takes a government jet to Tofino to go surfing for the weekend, how does he rationalize that? That is something we will talk about. I think it does not matter who you are; people should follow through with their commitments. I think climate change is a real big concern. We should have leadership from our prime minister, and he should show that personally. I do not think this panel should be devolving into leftwing, rightwing debates. I do not think we are going to settle anything by calling each other communists or fascists or anything like that.

I think the opportunity we have today is to discuss about what opportunities we have with new technology and how those opportunities have presented themselves with the decline of legacy media and the rise of mobile technology, whether it is cell phones and social media.

AB: We are not dead yet. Taylor, it is an important point, because you are able to do the things that so-called

legacy media cannot do. You guys have a wider berth with respect to the avenues you can use. You do not necessarily have unions around you. You do not have the accountability layers that legacy media does, though you still can be held accountable for the stuff that you put out. How do you guys pierce through maybe some of the criticism that might come your way and say, “This is just yet another propaganda arm of the so-called progressives, and they want to just spend more of my money.” How do you guys get your information, for one thing, and then disseminate it in a way that is fair?

TS: I think we are completely transparent and explicit about our point of view, which is that we have a progressive point of view. I think that is no different than any other media outlet, including the legacy ones.

Certainly, the Toronto Sun has a point of view. Criticism is good. I welcome criticism. We get lots of criticism. We always strive to a standard of accuracy I think that people expect from us. When we fail to meet that standard, we hear about it instantly from our own audience. I do not know if this is true on the right side of things, but certainly on the progressive side of things, there is very little tolerance for inaccurate information, from misinformation. If we get something wrong in something we post, people get very upset about that.

There is really no advantage to us in trying to be anything but as factual as we can possibly be. In terms of where we get our information from, we depend on traditional journalists and reporters to produce that original report. I certainly think that is a public good that needs to be supported. We are no replacement for that.

AB: With so much out there and so many ways and means by which Canadians can consume, Jasmine, how do you take a very finite period of time that someone has to consume something, how do you make it impactful for them?

JP: That is really an interesting question, and I was actually going to go in the opposite direction very much based on the question you just asked. One idea that I brought with me when I came to the Canadian Taxpayers Federation was to really expand our podcast reach. The reason for that is because I think there is a really deep appetite amongst Canadians for longer-form conversations that are less combative because I could not agree with you more. When you watch the six o'clock news—sorry, legacy media—and you have got a panel of people with combating views, you are not going to be moved. If you went in as a conservative, you are going to come out as a conservative and vice versa across the entire political spectrum. I think one really amazing trend that we are seeing that is just opening up



a meaningful dialogue and less of an ideological one is this shift toward more long-form media, like podcasts, where I am often driving out of town a couple of hours, or in town for that matter, but you are driving; you put on a podcast, and you can listen about a topic for two hours, or you are cleaning your house on a Saturday, and you can really dive a lot deeper and have a much better understanding for the issue. I am glad to see that podcasts are emerging as a new, important medium.

I think the statistic was something like more than half of Canadians listen to podcasts once a month. That is really encouraging, and I hope we will break down this very siloed political discourse into more of a conversation about ideas. Not to be one of those panelists who talks too long, but *[I want to note that]* another interesting development that we are seeing along those lines that is conducive to the growth of podcasts has been the growth of, they call it the ‘intellectual dark web’, which is kind of a silly term. What it is, is a bunch of professors and intellectuals online, predominantly YouTube, of all different political stripes, including some Canadians like Jordan Peterson, but we have also got some scientists, like the Weinstein brothers and more leftwing, rightwing—it does not matter.

They are all just committed to open dialogue that is respectful with the goal of getting toward the truth, as opposed to winning a political debate. I think those

YouTube videos and podcasts, both *[of which are]* long-form forms of media, are really important to getting beyond just siloed political discussions.

AB: Let us move forward and look to the next federal election, which is just a few short months away. One of the reasons why so many of these nice folks are here is to hear from all four of you how you will be engaging in that next federal election, what you will be doing.

I would prefer if you gave me away all your tactics, but you do not have to. How will the Broadbent Institute, for example, be engaging Canadians in terms of what you guys think that the ballot box question will be, come October?

RS: I think the ballot box question is going to be something related to the economic anxiety that people are feeling and what is to be done about it. We will be trying to provide good ideas in that regard, trying to make sure that the terrain is beneficial to progressives.

We are going to be doing some of what we just did in the Alberta election, which I was very proud of.

We spent a lot of time doing some background research on UCP candidates in Alberta and revealed some, frankly, really disturbing views from some of those candidates and made sure that became part of the public debate. One of the reasons that we started PressProgress is we did not think that the mainstream

media—or maybe it is because we are Canadian and we are all very polite and we are conflict averse or something—was paying enough attention to the increasing extremism on the conservative side of the fence. We, unapologetically, go after that on a daily basis and try to surface that and point out how not normal those views are and not mainstream in terms of the history of this country.

We will be doing all of that and aiming all of that at the Conservatives over the next few months.

AB: And arguably with some success, because some of those candidates were hunted from the lineup.

RS: We brought to light some very objectionable views, doing a lot of background research on the web because nothing really dies online these days. I feel good about the fact that those folks are not in the UCP caucus.

I think that is a credit to—that is all good and good for Alberta and for the country.

AB: Jeff, your organization is going to be—as I said earlier, you have now Canada Proud.

JB: Yes.

AB: You have taken what you have done in Ontario and, I believe, in B.C. as well.

JB: B.C., others. I was involved in Alberta Proud which

was involved in the Alberta election, too, but I do not manage that. They just hired me to help advise on it.

AB: There is expectation that you will be very much engaged in the next federal election. You have already mentioned a couple of things that you will be doing against Justin Trudeau, for example. For your success, what do you believe the ballot box question is, and then how will your organization come up with facts that are fair and easy for Canadians to understand, and how would you measure success?

JB: I think the election is already on. I think elections are now won way before election day. Kathleen Wynne—it took two years of us hammering her weekly. We are reaching millions of people very week, and with every misstep Kathleen Wynne and her government made, it built up a perception in people’s mind. It was a motive, and we helped make Kathleen Wynne socially unacceptable. That is what we are trying to do against Justin Trudeau. Thank you. I am in the Albany Club, I think, anyways. That is what we are trying to do with Justin Trudeau, and we are doing it. We are reaching millions of people every week. We have done 13, almost 14 million video views since January 1st, and we have not had to spend a lot of money doing it.

We are on top of everything that Justin Trudeau does wrong. I will give a good example. A couple of weeks ago, Justin Trudeau was with the Japanese

prime minister, and he mixed up China and Japan twice. Really embarrassing for our country.

**Q: You did not sleep all night.**

JB: Thanks for your commentary. Really embarrassing for our country. If anyone knows anything about geopolitics, it is incredibly embarrassing. The media glossed over it. The CBC wrote a headline, “China top of mind at Japanese talks,” but we created memes. We made fun of Trudeau. We showed him how really foolish he is. Hundreds of thousands of people saw that content without us spending a dollar on it. We are hammering Trudeau. I think we have had a big impact on his low polling numbers, and we are going to continue to do so. We have got some really creative plans, and we have learned a lot about what PressProgress did during the Alberta election, so we are going to be really focused on research, but we are also going to do a lot of different things in the next few months trying to create content that people want to be entertained by and informed by.

AB: Yes, I think that is actually a key to a lot of it. People do want to be entertained, and, again, *[there is]* such a short period of time to get their attention. Taylor, with that question I posed to the others, what do you believe is going to be the ballot box question, and how will North99 be engaging?

TS: I agree with Rick. I think it will be centred around the economic anxiety that a lot of people are feeling in this country. I will say I am deeply concerned about the influence of the right online, not just the groups that Jeff has spun up, but there is a whole network of some legitimate, some astroturf corporate-funded organizations, many funded by oil sands operators, who reach millions of people every week on Facebook, on YouTube, through other channels, that nobody talks about, and nobody even sees it unless you happen to be in their audience, but their audience is enormous and they have an enormous impact and they can do that because they have spent years investing and building those organizations. And that work simply has not been done at that scale on the left, on the progressive side of things. I am concerned that they will be able to define the ballot box question. Our job is going to be to try to make sure that does not happen and to hold Andrew Scheer accountable every day for his views and his beliefs, which I think are well outside the Canadian mainstream and push candidates to embrace the progressive policies that we feel that they need to embrace in order to defeat the Conservatives in 2019.

AB: Ultimately, it is going to be about 30% of Canadians that are undecided that will probably ultimately decide who wins the next election. How do you get to those 30% Jasmine? How do you make an impact to them?

JP: Going back to what the ballot box questions, then, will be for that 30%, I think there will be two ballot box questions. The first will be a referendum on Justin Trudeau and his leadership. The second will be about the carbon tax. To go to the first, Justin Trudeau, I do not think is running against Andrew Scheer. I think he is running against who Justin Trudeau was in 2015 and what our expectations were for him then.

There has been a lot of mud thrown at him since then. There have been a lot of mistakes made. ‘Sunny ways’ is almost now—maybe thanks to Jeff, I do not know—a meme on social media, because that is really not how Canadians feel about his leadership, so I do think it will be a referendum on him. Secondly, in terms of getting to that 30%, with the carbon tax, the 905, certainly in Ontario, is a big determinant of how this province swings. They are commuting long distances. They are paying a lot in gas prices right now, and they are feeling the crunch. I do think that the carbon tax can really impact that swing vote there.

AB: We are going to take some questions from the audience, but one last thing I wanted to have all of you address, because it is top of mind and we are having this discussion right now—certainly in each of our newsrooms—is this Digital Charter that the prime minister has proposed. There is very little information around it. How do you think any of that, based on what we

know, will impact anything that you do, for example, at the Broadbent Institute, Rick?

RS: I do not think so. I think it is just bizarre. I have no idea what he was talking about.

AB: I do not think he does.

RS: I do not know what it is. I just have no idea what that is about. At the end of the day, PressProgress is a news organization, so we are going to keep pumping out stories. The idea that the prime minister, at this late date, a few months before the election can, in any disinterested way, come out with this kind of tool is ludicrous. It has to be seen in that light.

JP: I agree. It was a really vague document. I do not think anyone knows what the heck it means. There was a little bit in there toward the end that could raise some concerns about what this means for freedom of speech, what this means in terms of government regulation of the media. Certainly, on the heels of the media bail-out, there is a lot of concern already, so I think it is one thing to acknowledge that this is a legitimate concern and the government may or may not need to regulate these big tech players. It is to be determined.

There have not been any governments on this planet who yet have done so, I think, successfully. Will the Canadian government get it right? I do not think this



charter does much on that front. Maybe they do need to regulate it. What I think no one is talking about is the concern that if the government just makes laws willy-nilly, that can also have really negative repercussions as well. We need to be really, really careful. This is uncharted territory, and the government can do a lot of damage here if it makes laws recklessly.

AB: Taylor, of course, this is all under the premise of the so-called fake news and bad actors that may be trying to interfere in our federal election or, frankly, in any of our elections. Any impact or any view, from you, on this so-called Digital Charter?

TS: I do not see how it would impact us. I have no strong opinion on it. I think we need to see more detail.

JB: Yes, we need to see more details. I think some of it is actually really interesting. Some of it is about our own personal data with banking and how we can transfer that over, how that will respond to fintech and the competition. I think that is a discussion we need to have.

Other parts, I am really concerned about: Define ‘disinformation’, define ‘hate’. I think that could be very dangerous if we go down that Orwellian route.

As it stands now, I think it is a silly move from a silly prime minister.

## Questions & Answers

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AB: I know we have some questions from the audience.

Would you like to go first, sir?

**Q: I have spoken enough.**

RS: He has heckled us throughout.

**Q: Hi there. Thanks for this discussion. Sonia Carreno from the Interactive Advertising Bureau of Canada. I just wanted to touch on the charter a little bit and in relation to your discussion around memes, specifically, and this idea of when you start to, I guess talk about the fact that Canadians want to be entertained and creating memes and slamming and getting into the grill of the incumbent. How do you manage the perception of fake news? How do you certify the information that is being used, and how do you make that distinction? Are we starting to devolve, I guess into just “memery” to inform Canadians on important issues?**

AB: Whoever wants to tackle that first, please.

JB: With our memes, there are clear ones that are jokes.

Those ones we do not source. If Trudeau is saying, “Sushi is my favourite Chinese food,” we are not going to source that. That is clearly a joke. In regards to everything else we do, we source it. We thoroughly source it. Obviously, we have our bias. Everyone has

their bias. The Toronto Star has their bias. The Toronto Sun has their bias. That is part of it. I think in Canada, we have a huge vacuum for good, political satire. 22 Minutes is the lamest thing. No one watches it.

Outside of that, what do we have? Nothing. We do not have Saturday Night Live; we do not have Seth Meyers; we do not have John Oliver. We have nothing.

TS: CBC comedy.

JB: So good, I cannot wait to watch it. That is what is missing in our political discourse. I think that is—I am not a Trump fan, but I love listening to rightwing and leftwing voices talking about Donald Trump. I love that humour. I want to talk about politics. We should be making fun of politicians. That is an important part of democracy.

**Q: How do you certify the content that is in your bite-sized information?**

JB: There is a difference between a meme and a graphic.

For a graphic, if it is more in depth, we source it.

If we are stating a fact, like breaking news *[and saying]* this thing happened, it will say, “CBC News, July 20th, 2019,” for example.

AB: The short answer is they still source us in the legacy media.

JB: Yes. As Taylor said earlier, we are just expanding the media ecosystem. We are not replacing legacy media in that regard. We just have our role to play. It has been going on all over Europe and in Britain and in the United States. Ontario probably is actually modelled off after a democratic group called MoveOn.org.

That is my inspiration. It is not anything else.

AB: Does anybody else want to weigh in on that?

RS: This notion of incorrect content, deliberately incorrect content is a problem in the conservative world. That is not a problem for progressives. Conservatives lie and progressives do not; ‘#fakenews’ was popularized by Donald Trump.

AB: We really do not have much time for this room. Oh, my goodness. Wow.

RS: I was going to say. Again, there is no symmetry to this debate. It is not, like—anyway, I think it is important that people are held to account for what they are pumping out online. We are happy to be held to that standard.

**Q: My question here, today, is for Rick and Taylor. When you look around the world, you look at Brexit, and you look at Trump getting elected, the Five Star Movement in Italy and Brazil, all of these rightwing movements that are winning big, I wonder if it is that a communications problem.**

**And when you look at the Ontario Proud and others, what do you see that they are doing right that you would like to get in on? Why I am asking that, Rick, is you talked about the candidates in Alberta, and I think PressProgress did some pretty groundbreaking work in terms of bringing down candidates, but Jason Kenney won 55% of the vote, so it did not shift the election.**

RS: Only.

**Q: I am just wondering: You look at the right online and what lessons are you pulling from that, and you think is it a communications problem, or are voters more rightwing? Where do you think that sits, to you and Taylor?**

RS: I think, as progressives, we need to become more muscular and aggressive online and with our activism, generally. One thing that we have certainly learned from Ontario Proud and others is that we need to get out there, and we need to make our points in the most aggressive manner possible and reach way more people than we are reaching. This notion of populism and what lies at the root of it and why people, why voters are being driven to vote for parties, like the Five Star Movement where we are going to see a very difficult European election result next week with rightwing populist parties really gaining ground—I agree with

Taylor that we need to better define what a progressive populism looks like. We need to offer better solutions to people that are feeling pinched. The fact of the matter is that the average Canadian has not had a raise since the mid 1980s. That is a statistical reality, so it is not people's imagination when they are sitting around the kitchen table and are trying to figure out how to make ends meet, feeling like they cannot get ahead. So far, conservatives have done a better job providing supposed solutions to those voters rather than progressives. We need to better compete on that terrain.

TS: I agree with that. I think the communications has to come second after substance. What we have seen in a lot of these places where rightwing populism has ascended is that the traditional parties of the left, the social democratic parties essentially stopped speaking to ordinary people, and they stopped offering a critique of the system, which ordinary people correctly identified as no longer serving their interest. I understand why they voted for Brexit. I understand why people voted for Trump because they were the only people speaking to their problems. Until we fix that, I think the communications is never going to work, but the communications also has to be something we tackle.

I think I alluded to that earlier in the way that we speak to people has to—we have to meet people where they are. We cannot expect to talk to people as if ev-

everyone is a grad student in political theory. That is just not realistic, and it is never going to work.

AB: We have time for two more questions.

**Q: I just wanted to address some of the recent points that you made about language that is ordinary and simple to understand. In the age of digital media, it means that we are very much more inclined to identify what is wrong. How do we start to create this narrative where we do not just identify the issues, but we also make the solutions easy to understand in an age of social media? I think it is important that if we have a list of wrongs, we also have a list of ways to address them that people can easily digest.**

AB: Jasmine, I think that you could probably address that. It is easy to point out the problems. Sometimes the solutions are easy, but how do you get Canadians or get anybody to appreciate them or understand them?

JP: Can someone else start? To be honest, I am still trying, one thing, I guess I would say is you are right that when you watch the media, sometimes it seems like everything is going wrong. It is almost like a bias that you develop. Not to diminish that there are a lot of big issues this country is facing, but a book that I really enjoyed recently was Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now*, which talks about all of these trends that show that we are actually headed in a really great di-

rection—like, so many important metrics, not only in Canada, but across the world in terms of quality of life, longevity, education-wise. All of these things are really improving. You do not see a reporter standing in a peaceful zone saying there has not been a war here in 100 years, so I think the media does often skew, in our minds, that things are going wrong, but there really are a lot of things that are going right. It is just not really clickbait.

AB: Yes, I think that is part of the issue.

RS: I think things are going to hell in a handbasket.

AB: You are just doom and gloom.

TS: I think there is a good example of this at work if you look at how the American left has responded to the climate crisis and how the government here has responded to the climate crisis. If you look at the signs that the kids who are part of the Sunrise Movement advocating for Green New Deal in the U.S. carry around, they say “Good Jobs, Livable Future.” Everyone can understand what that means. It is clear. Here, we talk about pollution tax with a rebate, but you have got to do the rebate on your taxes, and then there is some exemptions for people. No one understands the solution.

I think it is absolutely critical that we communicate our positive priorities in a way that is also simple to



understand—the same way we communicate our critiques.

RS: I agree with that.

JB: I think, to that end, too, our legacy media in Canada—not to bemoan them even more—are not really serving our interests. They are talking about insider baseball nonsense, who used what stock photo during what campaign. No one cares. They are not speaking to people's everyday concerns and solutions to our problems. I think American media is now adjusting.

We have seen the decline of major U.S. newspaper dailies, but then suddenly the Washington Post and the New York Times are doing really well. One of the reasons I think the New York Times is doing well is they have a podcast called “The Daily,” and they are using new mediums to tell new stories. I listen to “The Daily” every day. It is not rightwing or leftwing. I think it is just pretty centrist, and it is very interesting.

That is what I really—I think that is what Canadians are craving here, at home. I think there is a huge lust for good, meaningful content about issues where it is just not drive-by smears and process. In Ottawa, we have the Press Gallery. They all drink at the same bar.

They all know each other. It is so clubby, and they are not writing for the mom in Whitby or the plumber in Kamloops. They are writing to please themselves.

I think there are a lot of great journalists here in Canada, but, for too often, the press galleries are the ones that drive the narrative, and they are the ones that are doing a disservice to this country.

AB: We have time for one last question for whoever gets to the mic first, and I would ask you all to keep your answers short, please.

**Q: If it is the last question, I would just like to thank all the panelists. It has been a really entertaining discussion. You see it a lot in the United States, but there are some anxieties, particularly on the conservative end of big social media giants banning certain commentators for their views on whatever might be going on today. Do you think that in this age of social media—and, I guess, political discourse is mainly gauged on social media—it is okay that social media giants basically can control and decide who gets to say what, or should it be something that the government maybe regulates, mandates, and there be a standard set that everybody has to follow, and the government should step in?**

AB: Who should be the arbitrator?

RS: I think it is very important that if you are spewing hate online, you should be banned. I am very proud: Press-Progress did an article on Faith Goldy this past week, digging into her donors. Made her very annoyed at us,

which I am delighted about. I am not sure it is an either/or in terms of your question. I think that if you are Facebook, if you are Twitter, if you are Instagram, you should be proactively clamping down on people who are using your platforms in objectionable ways—and there should be common sense government regulation as well. I do not think it is one or the other.

I think it is a good thing that Facebook has finally started to get out ahead of this stuff, even if it is difficult, even if you shut a voice down over here, and one pops up over here. These are big, complicated platforms. It is not easy, but it is critical that these kinds of voices be held accountable in social media space in the same way that they are in real life.

JP: If I can just jump in. I think nobody in this room would say that we want hate speech on Facebook. That is not the issue. The issue is who defines what hate speech is. That is a very difficult question to answer.

Recently, on *The Post Millennial*, they did an article about how a number of academics and respectable people in this country were calling Quillette a white supremacist publication, which is very far from the truth, in my opinion, vastly untrue. It is scary when you get into this de-platforming business. We had, actually, Jordan Peterson and Dave Rubin actually, even though, I think Jordan Peterson was doing something

close to \$70,000 a month in user donations. He was getting on Patreon, which for those of you who do not know, it is a crowdfunding platform. He was making \$70,000 a month in pure user donations and decided to abandon the platform, because it had made some very arbitrary decisions with regards to de-platforming.

We can all agree, no one wants hate speech, but it is problematic when you get to the point of who gets to define that and, I think it is very questionable to depend on the government to have common sense in that regard.

TS: I am suspicious of concentrated corporate power, and I do not think we should be delegating decisions about what is and what is not hate speech to Mark Zuckerberg or Jack Dorsey or any of these people. I think those are decisions that should be made democratically. The fact that we are not making them democratically now and just leaving it up to Facebook to decide, I think is a real problem.

JB: Yes, I tend to agree with that, too. I think the concern, obviously, is hate has no place in the public discourse, and Facebook has every right to ban people, but, when they do so, they should give reasons. There are people who have been banned, and I want to know why Paul Joseph Watson or others have been banned. Tell us, what did they do wrong? I think that would make everyone feel better, and that would give us more trust in

these platforms. There is also the debate about whether Facebook needs to be broken up. They have so much power. We do not know how Facebook's news-feed algorithm works. It is a little bit alarming to think about how much power Mark Zuckerberg has and how he can decide elections, how Google can filter search results. These are things that we need to be cognizant of. I am worried that the solution will be worse than the problem.

JP: If you saw Zuckerberg in front of the Senate in the U.S., it was actually very comical. For anyone who has not seen it, lawmakers were trying to ask the necessary questions to really hammer out some sort of regulation. I think we are very far from—the government really lags behind.

AB: Thank you to all of you. Jeff, Jasmine, Taylor, Rick—a thoughtful conversation.

Certainly, we concluded on not very much, but we did great on a few things, which I think is fascinating. Thank you to all of you, of course, for attending this evening. We hope that you were somewhat enlightened. Maybe a few of your questions got answered.

That is the challenge with this type of discussion, which is that there are for more questions yet to be posed. Thank you to the Empire Club for hosting us this evening.

KE: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen: The Fresh Faces Panel! Of course, that Rick Smith is the freshest of all the fresh faces. I am saying that for his kids, of course. Thanks, Rick. We are going to invite our sponsor up. Thank you to Navigator for sponsoring us.

Mike Van Soelen will be speaking on behalf of Navigator. Thank you.

**Note of Appreciation, by Mr. Mike Van Soelen,  
Managing Principal, Navigator Limited;  
Third Vice President, Empire Club of Canada**

Thanks. I will be brief. Navigator appreciated the opportunity to sponsor this event.

We care a lot about conversations and how they take place in this country. It was great to hear from four people who are doing this in dynamic and interesting ways and really fascinating to hear their thoughts ahead of the next federal election. On behalf of Navigator, for the panelists, thank you very much.

## **Concluding Remarks, by Kent Emerson**

Quick announcements, everybody. There has been a bunch of concepts talked about tonight. One of them is ‘hate speech’. The Empire Club has decided to delve into this issue. We have put together an event on June 13th that features Bernie Farber, Global TV’s Farah Nasser, and academics and many others to talk about this issue in a real way. That is on June 13th at lunch. Of any of you interested in that, I hope you come.

For this evening’s event, food will be served again in a minute. There are drinks coming back. I want you guys to enjoy yourselves tonight.

There is one more evening event this season we have lined up so far, and that is with Minister Mary Ng, who is the Minister of Small Business, and she is going to be moderating an event called “Women Who Build,” which is about women in the construction industry.

There are very few of them. They are talking about their issues, their challenges, their successes. That is coming up next month.

We have also one more federal event, a federal politics event. We are doing CBC’s Power in Politics, live at the Empire Club on June 10th, at lunch. Come out to that.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.