

Electoral Reform

To all member of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for agreeing to serve on what I am sure will be a complex and time consuming task, one which I hope that each of you will set partisan considerations aside and make recommendations based upon what will be best for our democracy in the long term. Thank you also for the opportunity to address the committee, I am sure you will receive many lengthy professionally prepared submissions so I will keep his a brief as possible given the complexity of the subject.

About me

I am a Canadian senior citizen living in rural Ontario who has been researching and writing regularly about our democracy and the decline of it for more than 15 years on my blog titled Democracy Under Fire.

My personal opinion

Having voted for the MMP system in the Ontario referendum and since become much more informed upon the available systems and their variations I now prefer the more basic Preferential Vote system for the following reasons.

- 1) It gives the voter the choice to select an alternative 'representative' if their first choice does not win the riding.
- 2) The ballot remains fairly simple, will add little to the time required to fill it out.
- 3) The outcome from such a system is much harder to predict by pollsters. This in my view is a good thing and should reduce strategic voting.
- 4) It does not increase the number of MPs in the house and thus the cost to fund them and places to seat them..
- 5) It does not create enormous combined riding's where possible 'representatives' could reside hundreds (possibly many hundreds in some parts of Canada) of miles from the citizens voting.
- 6) It gives the choice of voting a secondary choice for the person representing another party if the two do not coincide in their first choice.
- 7) Each and every vote "counts" and voters whose first choice is not appointed may get their second choice rather than someone they oppose.

All of the above being said I would be reasonably satisfied with almost any of the available systems on the table but am more concerned that the process takes into consideration ALL of the available possibility's and ALL of the variations therein. The exception being any that effectively increase the size of our already large rural riding and place potential representatives far from our local area.

I do not believe that any particular voting system would substantially favour one party over another as with changes to the way we vote the voting pasterns may change considerably. All of the alternative systems would probably result in greater representation of minority partys and some may well increase

the probability of minority parliaments (not necessarily a bad thing), a situation which our parliamentarians will have to get used to and be less confrontational and more cooperative! A change in voting system will not cure all that is wrong with our parliamentary system only better conduct by those elected and the party apparatus they are associated with can do that!

Considerations to be addressed

Much of the public call for electoral reform appears to be focused upon obtaining representation in the House that reflects the popular vote across Canada. Many folks are calling for a proportional system meaning some version of Mixed Member Proportional, this is probably a reasonable goal however I wonder if to obtain such results that the 'cure' would be worse than the affliction! I believe that many of those calling for 'proportional' have no idea of what, in a practical sense, is involved in such a system. You will no doubt have a far greater knowledge of the various options than I once your expert witnesses have presented to you in the next few weeks and I will not detail them here, I will however point out some of the issues which concern me and areas where you may wish to question the experts about.

MMP issues

Any proportional system (that I am aware of) requires that 'extra' MPs be selected by some means or another and with the size of our legislature could, depending upon the discrepancy between those actually elected party affiliation and the 'party' vote, be a considerable number. Although not a definitive comparison, to make the 2011 results 'proportional' for each party with the popular vote would require more than 90 'extra' MPs for instance.

Consideration should be given to both the budget and space required to accommodate these 'extra' MPs. No matter how selected (closed list, open list or other means) the question of to whom these individuals are accountable to and who they are perceived to, or actually, represent in a practical way is important. Will they represent their party rather than the public whom they should serve?

They will obviously reside in a riding already served by an elected MP who in all probability will not be affiliated with the same party. Will this create a conflict and / or a perception that some ridings have greater representation than others?

There may be ways to minimize my concerns above but I have found few answers despite considerable research on MMP systems. One such possibility regarding the selection of those 'extra' MPs is to select then from the riding candidates of the required party that did not get elected but received the highest percentage of votes across the country. This removes the 'list' requirements from the political party's control which to my mind is one of the major objections to the MMP system.

Finally a 'threshold' is generally set which eliminates the parties which do not receive a certain percentage of popular votes from being considered for 'extra' MPs, the level of this threshold could have a marked effect upon smaller or developing parties and must set so as not to markedly affect the proportionality of the makeup of the House.

STV issues

This system that seeks to obtain a more proportional result by combining riding to give voters a wider choice of candidates is not proportional even though many include it in such listings. Such a system may well be a reasonable compromise system in urban areas but is, in my view, totally unsuited in rural areas of Canada where some ridings are already cover thousands of square miles.

Voters trying to select individuals who live hundreds of miles away who have little or no connection with local communities would face a near impossible task'

Such a choice would probably result in citizens selecting candidates purely upon their party affiliation and not the individual's merits. It would be a step backwards in my view and as a long time rural resident the least acceptable system.

Preferential Vote (Instant run off) issues

As I have said above this appears to be least complex system other than FPTP and the one i currently favour. No matter which system is adopted there is no reason why our local representatives cannot be selected by this method and in an MMP system even the party choice could be done by rating the choices.

The counting and allocation of the ballots in PV is a little more complex than in FPTP as is that in most of the other system but we must presume that the use of modern computerized counting systems will minimize such concerns.

The Ballots

In keeping with your mandate to avoid undue complexity in the voting process the physical appearance of the ballot and number and method of making the choices should be taken into consideration for any system selected. In all of the above systems voters must (may) make multiple choices, if ranked choices are made available in any of the systems the voter will be presented with quite a number of fields to fill in. This need not be onerous with the right ballot format, in keeping with the need for ballots to be both machine readable and verifiable across the board, I offer here a sample ballot for the most complex situation I can think of, that of an MMP ballot with preferential choices It is based upon some ballots used in certain U.S. Districts.

Rank the candidates listed below in order of preference by marking an X in the appropriate box
 You may only rank those you wish, do not reuse any numbers

Candidate #1	1	2	3	4	5	6
Candidate #2	1	2	3	4	5	6
Candidate #3	1	2	3	4	5	6
Candidate #4	1	2	3	4	5	6
Candidate #5	1	2	3	4	5	6
Candidate #6	1	2	3	4	5	6

Rank the Political Parties listed below in order of your preference
 by marking an X in the appropriate box
 You may only rank those you wish, do not reuse any numbers

Party A	1	2	3	4	5	6
Party B	1	2	3	4	5	6
Party C	1	2	3	4	5	6
Party D	1	2	3	4	5	6
Party E	1	2	3	4	5	6
Party F	1	2	3	4	5	6

Whilst online or telephone voting would be highly desirable the issues of identification and verifiability would first have to be solved, whilst access codes and pin numbers could be used to ensure individuals were eligible to vote I cannot see any method of ensuring that an independent recount can be undertaken of electronic votes in the event of alleged malfeasance. If a solution can be found to this problem then electronic voting would, I believe, do much to increase the number of citizens participating in an election, particularly within our younger demographic. I note that Ontario has tested and is now promoting a paper system with electronic “assist” (i.e. tabulating machines and computer aided identification which seem like a reasonable compromise.

Mandatory Voting

Whilst every effort must be made to encourage citizens to vote using media releases by Election Canada and by making the voting proceeds as quick and easy as possible I do not believe that forcing individuals to vote is appropriate in a democracy. Those made to do so would in all probability either choose at random or deliberately spoil the ballot, hardly productive!

Other issues

In considering the ease of voting issue some members may not be aware that at rural polls the delay and lineups are more often than not caused by the vulgarities of rural addressing where the voter identification does not exactly match that in the EC lists. In some cases attending the poll where your neighbour across the road votes only to find that your poll is 10 miles down the road despite the poll

you have attended is a few hundred yards from your residence can be very frustrating for citizens.. This is more an issue for Elections Canada than yourselves but you should be aware that in some case the lack of suitable polling locations in rural areas can result in the polls being some considerable distance from the voter's residence and discourage some folks from voting.

Conclusion

With the above in mind, which by no means covers all the possible voting systems or the variations thereof, it is critical that when an advocate (or for that matter an expert) is speaking of a particular system they specify what particular variation they are talking about. It is insufficient to say "I support Preferential voting" or STV or Preferential voting, One must ask, open or closed list, how selected, what threshold, combine how many ridings, etc. etc. In their final submission I urge the committee to ensure that such details are full explained for the system proposed including the details of the ballots and potential costs and physical requirements to accommodate said system.

I thank you all for your service in this regard and hope that I have assisted you in asking the right questions of both your experts and those that would advocate for one system of another. I do not envy you in your task but hope you can complete it in a collegial and nonpartisan manner.

Don Rawls

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Notes

Rough calculation of 2011 results made proportional.

*166 (41%) Conservatives (the number actually elected), 125 (31%) New Democrats, 72 (18%) Liberals, 22 (5.5%) Bloc Québécois, and 14 (3.5%) Greens. **TOTAL around 400 MPs** (rough figures / rounding errors / no partial MPs!) Note that the Greens and the Bloc would 'appoint' more MPs than were elected! (I also note we now have more than 308 ridings to start with!)*