

A Brief for the Special Committee on Electoral Reform:
Views from a private citizen in Moncton NB

Julian Howatt
Thursday 28 July 2016

Dear Special Committee on Electoral Reform,

My name is Julian Howatt. I am young Canadian, an entrepreneur and urban farmer and a soon-to-be father. I have been following the issue of electoral reform closely over the past few months. This evening, I attended a town hall meeting on the issue held by my MP, the Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor. I am happy to report to you that it was well attended and facilitated a number of interesting discussions and debates. I would like to highlight to you a few of the important points I have taken away from this meeting.

- Regarding the existing “first past the post” electoral system
 - This system is understood by and familiar to Canadians, however it was unanimous among those in attendance this evening that it produces results that are unfair and unrepresentative of voters' intentions. It leads to disillusionment and cynicism with our democratic system. Nobody in attendance voiced support for keeping this system. I certainly do not support it.

- Regarding alternative electoral systems
 - All groups this evening seemed to share a desire for two key characteristics in a new electoral system
 - local representation: people want to know who represents them, who they can contact if they have a concern or issue and they want to be able to hold this person accountable
 - a component of proportional representation: people want the overall allocation of parliamentary seats to reflect, at least broadly if not exactly, the proportion of votes each party receives
 - An important secondary characteristic expressed by a number of groups is a desire to vote for, not against, a person or a party. The “first past the post” system encourages voting against something. A system in which people feel and can see their votes count would encourage them to vote for something.
 - The two systems discussed this evening that most closely fulfill these desires for local and proportional representation are:
 - P3 (proportional-preferential-personalized)
 - MMP (mixed member proportional representation)
 - Both systems are summarized well at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/electoral-reform-types-1.3577721>
 - Basically both systems contain elements of local representation and proportional representation. The major differences are:
 - P3 is stronger on local representation than proportional representation because all MPs are directly elected, but the share of seats in Parliament only broadly reflects the proportion of votes each party receives
 - MMP is stronger on proportional representation than local representation because the share of seats in Parliament exactly

reflects the proportion of votes each party receives, but not all MPs are locally elected, some (perhaps a quarter, a third or a half) are selected from party lists

- I am most in favour of the P3 system as local representation is my first concern and proportional representation is my second concern. Many at this evening's meeting, including me, are concerned with the idea of MPs elected from party lists. These MPs would not be accountable to voters, but instead to political parties. It seems neither transparent nor democratic.
- Regarding voter education
 - Many groups discussed the great need for more and better education regarding our electoral system. This includes everything from mock elections in schools to allowing Elections Canada to actively educate Canadians on the electoral system to everything in between.
- Regarding mandatory voting
 - There were differing opinions on this. The one that stayed with me is that making it mandatory seems undemocratic. We should be striving for high voter turnout because people want and care to vote, not because they are obligated to do so.
- Regarding online voting
 - There were again differing opinions on this. I am of the opinion that online voting should be a component of the voting system. As a dual citizen of both Canada and Switzerland, I vote online every 3 or 4 months in Swiss referendums. I find this system convenient and secure. I would not vote nearly as often on Swiss matters if I had to do it by mail. It would also be particularly helpful in encouraging young Canadians and Canadians with limited access to traditional voting methods to vote.
- Regarding putting the issue of electoral reform to a referendum
 - Once again, this was a topic with a wide variety of opinions. The one I would like to put forward is that if we have a referendum it should be a simple question such as:
 - Which electoral system do you prefer?
 - New electoral systems #1
 - New electoral systems #2
 - It was promised during the last election that the 2015 election would be the last "first past the post" election, so keeping it should not even be an option if a referendum is held.

I thank you for your work on the Special Committee on Electoral Reform and for taking my comments on this critical issue for Canadian democracy.

Kind regards,
Julian Howatt