

## **Building Democracy in Canada**

The arguments below are intended to inform the decisions made by the Special Committee on Electoral Reform. Canada's electoral system must evolve to meet the current, emerging and future needs of Canadians for a fair, democratic, participatory government that considers the needs of all citizens.

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### **Democracy does not mean majority rule**

There's a false notion out there that democracy means rule by the majority. This approach denies the values of those who have valid reasons for voting against an idea or an ideology. It denies the opportunity to amend or change a proposal so that it addresses the needs of more than just the majority. In many cases you can substitute majority for bully. The bully gets to make the rules and everyone else has to abide by them.

Democracy means rule by the people, all the people, not just the ones who lucked or tricked or bullied their way into a majority position. Good government would take into account the ideas, concerns and perspectives of all citizens when making and changing laws and policy. That's what the first, second and third reading are all about, and the Senate review, and consultations and lobbying and citizen advocacy - to review, revise, improve, amend and shape the legislation and policies so that they meet the needs of most of the people most of the time. It's supposed to be an inclusive, iterative process so that by third and final reading, everyone has had their concerns addressed and are all willing to vote for the proposal.

That's why those other parties have seats in Parliament, not to be shut out, but to add value to the government and to Canada. This is exactly why minority governments are usually so much better at governing and do more for their citizens than majority governments. The ruling minority is obliged to amend their proposed legislation, adjust their policies, and change their spending plans, in order to get their bills passed. It compels cooperation which results in better and more inclusive policies. It was under a minority government that we got Medicare.

The electoral system we have now in Canada, first-past-the-post (FPTP), along with our open-to-abuse campaign fundraising rules, allows a small elite, often a false majority, to create and drive and bully Canada without at all considering the day-to-day realities of the true majority of Canadians, the people, all the rest of us.

With a government elected according to a system of proportional representation (PR) we would get closer to real democracy. PR governments are more likely to be minority and coalition governments that consider the concerns of a much broader range of citizens' voices. Almost all OECD countries use some form of PR. Countries with PR governments have less income inequality, better opportunities for women, and stronger economies, among many other advantages.

Canada should have a form of mixed member proportional (MMP) electoral system as recommended by the Canadian Law Commission in their 2004 report Voting Counts.

## **Referenda are undemocratic**

A referendum is a form of FPTP. It reduces complex sociopolitical issues down to simplistic yes/no choices and then imposes the majority (bully) decision on everyone, even in very close votes. The winner takes all as in FPTP.

Referenda completely deny the rights and interests of the minority. In the Brexit vote, 48% of the population of Britain weren't able to have any influence; and there was no opportunity to offer alternatives, options, new ideas, or other ways to solve the problems facing Britain today. Just a simple choice, leave the EU completely or keep things exactly as they are - a very simplistic assessment of the problems and their solutions.

Canada should definitely not hold a referendum on the very important questions of electoral reform. We need a fulsome discussion of the options with all Canadians, not just a yes/no choice. It's a complex problem, it will require a complex solution. In the end, we need to create an electoral system that reflects the needs and wishes of as many Canadians as possible so that from now on, the decisions we make together meet everyone's needs.

Don't hold a referendum on electoral reform, and include provisions in the new Act and Regulations that prevent referenda from being used to make important, complex decisions.

## **Campaign financing**

Even with a robust proportional representation electoral system, the independence of the decisions made by governments and elected office holders can be unethically influenced by obligations to campaign donors and third party supporters.

There is a big motivation to maximize campaign spending - it can and does have a significant effect on election outcomes. Usually the candidate who spends the most is the one who wins. Not always, but usually. This biases the outcomes of elections in favour of the wealthy elite, and against the middle and lower income groups. The result of this centuries old in-built bias is the inequality gap; perpetuated and increased over the years because of multiple governments' willingness to put in place laws that benefit the wealthy at the expense of the rest of us.

If government's role is to provide a level playing field for all citizens, then we should be removing the great advantage that money brings to some candidates.

I suggest that we create a public campaign funding system with only a small proportion of additional private funding permitted. When a candidate declares themselves, the government provides them with a fixed, small, sum to spend on their campaign, and supports all candidates equally through things like sponsoring televised debates, and space in newspapers or on websites. It's up to the candidate to be creative and strategic with their resources and to win on their own good qualities, not on how many signs they can pay for.

Canada should limit third party political expenditures. There is good reason for groups like the Council of Canadians, Fair Vote Canada, or the unions to fund issue-based campaigns. It is quite another thing for a group of financiers to use their financial advantage to influence public policy and voter choice.

## **Electronic voting**

Canada should definitely put in place an electronic voting system for federal and provincial elections. It would increase voter turn out and make democracy more easily available to more Canadians.

Of course there would have to be extensive security controls, checks and oversight of the system, but we are one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world, surely we can figure it out.