

Submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

September 24, 2016

Special Committee on Electoral Reform
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada

Dear Hon. Members of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform,

Thank you for having provided me the opportunity to make this submission on the important initiative in improving Canadian democracy. I consider this as an honour and a privilege as a Canadian Citizen.

Summary

My submission provides personal background and experience that led me to make this submission, the reason for my support to proportional representation (PR) as an electoral reform, views on Northwest Territories and electoral reform, method of PR and expectation in the implementation of electoral reform.

Personal Background and experience

I came to Canada as an immigrant 35 years ago at the age of 28. As any other new comer, first few years of my living focussed on personally and professionally developing myself for better income generation prospects, which also involved moving from province to province. Yet, appropriate venues and connection for employments were lacking, unlike other Canadians who would have born and brought up in the Canadian system. As a good fortune, later during the 28 years of my life in Ontario, I came across a few political party contacts. Thereby, I was able to understand the positions of different parties. I also realized a political party which wasn't my first choice also had some acceptable socio-economic policies. This made me to believe the democratic system in Canada would provide opportunities for minorities like me. I freely used my voting rights as a Canadian citizen choosing the best candidate who would represent me. Further, I learnt I was contributing through taxes to maintain such democracy.

But more than last two decades, the trend of election campaign has changed. Ordinary Canadian citizens have been constantly bombarded with 11th hour election campaigns stating who should not represent us more than who should. Instead of political parties making alliances on common grounds, election campaigns have been in the direction of "my enemy is your enemy", in the name of strategic voting. This lead to not only voter confusion, but also undermine the hard work of good candidates and disrepute them, who otherwise would have been suitable representatives for their own communities. This does help neither to maintain the integrity nor to improve the Canadian Democracy.

My connections and network made me to become an ardent supporter of Fair Vote Canada (FVC), which advocated "make every vote count".

Why Proportional Representation?

FVC took an active role advocating for proportional representation (PR) presenting studies of experts and implementation of PR in various countries with improved results. Referendum on electoral reform in Ontario gave me an opportunity to learn about PR how the number of votes gained by parties will be distributed in equal percentages to the number of seats. I believe this will allow men, women, youth, indigenous and non-indigenous people get elected fairly to represent all Canadians. My vote will not be deprived from electing one of them.

Lately, in the last 4 ½ years, I have had opportunities to live in Nunavut (NU) and Northwest Territories (NWT). Both territorial governments function on consensus building without party affiliations in the elections. This allows maintaining continuity of policies and programs that entrenches values and choices of voters. The processes seem to be effective without much time spent on parliamentary question periods, unlike the provincial and federal. I have heard former MPs say that long sitting time in the parliament could have been well spent with their constituents. I believe PR would yield positive results allowing effective usage of representatives' time.

Further, in the current system, enacted legislation by the predecessor and repeal of the same legislation by the successor are unproductive political games, which not only undermines the interest of voter population, but also drain the resources of the government, which would have been better utilized on other priorities.

Northwest Territories and electoral reform

I understand that any proposal to change in NWT may have to be processed through Duty to Consult exclusively with indigenous people of the land. As I am a witness to advocate for a change, I take this opportunity to bring matters that impact this northern extent of the land. We face a unique situation in the NWT and other territories, represented by only one (1) MP in each and one (1) political party at a time, regardless of what position the party holds in the parliament. Firstly, implementation of proportional representation becomes impossible with one (1) representative in each territory. Secondly, in spite of the territories make up almost 2/5th of the geographical extent of Canada, only three (3) MPs represent the Government of Canada. The table in Appendix 1 clearly illustrate that. This is due to the historical practice of Elections Canada to have electoral distribution by number of electors, similar to unfair distribution of per capita basis funds. However, Elections Canada has a provision to have electoral distribution by geographical area as well.

The 33 communities in NWT are small, and none comparative to considerable size ridings in the provinces. These communities are dispersed far apart and many are not connected by land. Some are connected by seasonal ice roads, which are again under threat due to climate change. With lack of infrastructure, including electricity and communication facilities, and the hardships due to harsh Arctic weather conditions, representation of each territory by 1 MP is absolutely an under representation. When I lived in Ontario, I could see or meet a numbers of MPs at one event, for example an event in Scarborough would host all five representatives at the same time. In NWT, a constituent may not see or meet his/her representative in the entire term. It may not be possible for the representative to travel to all communities, as much he/she would like to.

At this juncture, it is quite relevant to consider increasing the number of representation in the NWT and other territories. Five (5) members one representing each region of NWT will not be too much to expect, where nineteen (19) MLAs represent the Government of NWT. All party committee on electoral reform shall provide a way to be represented by members of all four parties and even more, perhaps by an independent member as well.

Method of Proportional Representation

Considering the past experiences in the provinces, prime motive of my witnessing is for an electoral reform with proportional representation (PR), more than which PR system is applied. When in Ontario, I became familiar with MMP system. Lately, through FVC's extensive efforts, I learnt different systems and found STV is also a good system. I do not support any system of closed list, which again deprives electors' choice. FVC has worked with hundreds of professionals and experts. Members of the Special Committee shall obtain their views and analysis on deciding the system. Therefore, my witnessing limits to pursuing implementation of PR and increasing the number of representatives in NWT.

Implementation of Electoral Reform

Any process implemented needs to be clearly understood by the participants and the participants respond with no biases. Some parties may advocate for a national referendum.

A national referendum was called on Meech Lake Accord in 1992 and was defeated. As an ordinary public, I was only 10 years young, to this country, but 39 years old in age. Having completed M.A.Sc. degree from the University of Toronto in Electrical Engineering a few years earlier, provided some knowledge and experience about various systems in Canada, particularly in searching and finding jobs in my area of specialization, not yet much in politics. I recall that I became aware (misinformed) that "separation of Quebec" was the only or prime issue in the referendum. I do recall there were a lot of media attention, debates and discussion, mostly on the Quebec matter. I was not sure of what my 'Yes' and 'No' would mean to the question in the referendum. Only recently, I learnt that the referendum consisted of initiation of self-government negotiations with First Nations, senate reform and other matters, in addition to Quebec issue. Now I realize my vote, whichever way I voted, might have had an impact on other issues as well. Presently, living in the north, came forward to serve the northerners, I doubt myself whether I had played a role then preventing the progress of First Nations. That was a major political event in the history of Canada, where general public-innocent and ignorant voters - were misused, to determine the destinations of fellow Canadians, rather than the already elected leadership taking the political responsibility.

Now that I have learnt more on the Canadian political system and electoral reform, I believe that the parliamentarians have been given a mandate to act on what is good for Canadians, rather than calling a referendum, imposing responsibilities on ordinary public. Many citizens are busy with their day to day matters and unable to focus on and spare time to learn the intricacies of politics, unless they are in that field or learned to understand deeply. This is the reason general public depend on non-profit organizations and advocacy groups, who specialize on these areas and advocate on what is best for Canadians.

If the parliamentarians, political partisan, are still stumbling on whether a referendum is necessary or not, and plan to use (or misuse) the ordinary public to make the decision, it indicates definitely that an electoral reform is necessary to make the government stable and decisive.

In the past, referenda on electoral reform in different provinces set the threshold much higher than 51%, deviating from regularly accepted democracy. This indirectly sends a message to ordinary public, that they were expected to vote on something undesirable. I strongly believe ordinary public elect their representatives in good faith, even when they are forced into strategic voting, that the elected members would act with the best interest of the electors in mind, not use them.

Therefore, my humble request, as a responsible Canadian, is that Hon. Members limit the Electoral Reform work to wide public consultations only in Canada, but not extend to a referendum.

Once again thank you for having provided the opportunity.

Yours truly,

Ms. Janaki Balakrishnan

NB: JANAKI BALAKRISHNAN is the Principal of ENVISION and a Professional Engineer with over 35 years of experience in British Columbia, Ontario, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. She has extensive experience as not only an engineer but researcher, educator, supervisor, manager and leader in the utility industries, customer and consumer service businesses, engineering consultancy and academia. In addition to engineering consultancy, ENVISION specializes in self-governance, capacity development, sustainability and the self-reliance of northern communities post devolution.

(Words: 1773)

Appendix 1

No.	Territory/ Province/ Riding	No. of MPs	No. of MLAs/ MPPs	Area (sq. km)	Population	Electors	Remark
1.	Nunavut	1	22	2,093,190	31,906	31,906	Nunavut covers 3 times zones, 25 dispersed communities neither connected by land nor ice roads
2.	NWT	1	19	1,346,106	41,462	28,795	33 dispersed communities, most of those are not connected by land
3.	Yukon	1	19	482,443	33,897	25,264	
4.	NL	7	40	406,662	514,536	411,875	
5.	NB	10	49	74,668	751,171	587,823	
6.	NS	11	51	59,383	921,727	723,546	
7.	PEI	4	28	5,894	140,204	108,943	
8.	Toronto Centre	1	N/A	6	93,971	66,351	The smallest riding in Canada, thickly populated and comprise of hi-rise buildings and residences. It has its own problems and issues.
9.	ON	121	107	982,990	12,851,911	9,449,412	
10.	PQ	78	135	1,482,530	7,899,828	6,340,623	
11.	BC	42	85	947,906	4,400,057	3,245,881	
12.	AB	34	84	639,879	3,645,257	2,732,903	
13.	SK	14	61	632,212	1,033,381	749,004	
14.	MB	15	46	627,785	1,208,268	856,946	

Note:

The above is an abstract of the present status of geographical and electors representation from the Elections Canada data. There may be some discrepancies in the number of MLAs and MPPs, as the numbers changed infrequently.