

Submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, Parliament of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.

From Les Brown, Vancouver, BC, 15 August, 2016

My submission will address the issues of effectiveness and legitimacy, local representation and whether or not a referendum is needed to endorse electoral reform.

Effectiveness and legitimacy

Democracy both requires and implies majority rule. Unfortunately, Canada's First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral method frequently delivers a majority of parliamentary seats to a party that has gathered a minority of the votes. When this occurs we have minority, not majority rule.

The only way to effectively remedy the situation is to implement some form of Proportional Representation (PR). Whether Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) the Single Transferrable Vote (STV) or some other hybrid is chosen to replace FPTP, which system is chosen is relatively unimportant as long as the resulting elections are a fair reflection of the voters intentions and demonstrate proportionality.

It's important to recognize that the "ranked ballot", also known as the Alternative Vote (AV) as used in Australia for lower house elections would not produce proportionality. In fact, we can anticipate that AV in the Canadian political environment would likely be even less democratic than FPTP since many Conservative, NDP and Green second preferences would be cast in favour of the Liberal Party of Canada and deliver a stranglehold on political power.

My preference is for STV because it provokes competition between candidates in the same party, allows cross party voting and produces representative choice for the voters within enlarged constituencies. STV gives the best level of power and control to the voters.

Local representation

It must be very tempting, when you've been elected as a Member of Parliament, to believe that you are doing an outstanding job in representing all of your constituents at an unparalleled level of fairness, efficiency and integrity. Ah, the human condition.

My own straw poll on local representation suggests that only a small minority of constituents know the name of their MP and an even smaller minority have any occasion to meet or confer with their MP.

Dennis Pilon is most illuminating on this subject in *The Politics of Voting* (2007) which I recommend to Committee members and from which the following quotes are gathered:

Page 141 - "The broad acceptance of local representation as a key component of Canadian democracy is surprising , as much of the current "debate" represents a triumph of assertion over argument. Proponents of local representation insist it is crucial to Canadian politics but seldom bother to mount a serious case to defend it."

Page 142 -"countless academic studies have underlined that voters use party as the key factor in making their decision about which candidate to support."

Page 143 - "Other studies have asked voters to rank the factors that influence their voting decisions, and party comes out on top. One recent study did find that 40% of voters claimed that the individual candidate did factor into their voting decision. However, the much more crucial finding was that only 4% of respondents were prepared to rank the individual candidate higher in their vote choice if it meant deviating from their preferred party choice."

Page 143 - "Probably the most damning evidence against the "local representation" argument is simply that the voting results themselves demonstrate that people do not vote on the basis of locality. If the local were important, we might expect to see politicians elected on the basis of local identities rather than party identifications".

Page 143 - "The debate over local representation is important because those who make claims for it use it to defend our current plurality system or limit the range of options we may consider for reform. Now, if we are going to reform our voting system and some people like the idea of local representation, then such advocates should be free to make their case. But as with so many other aspects of the voting - system - reform debate, normative appeals should be brought into dialogue with the actual practice of Canadian politics. If trade-offs have to be made in the design of a new voting system, then they should be based more on those factors that are demonstrably important to Canadian voters - like party representation - and less on those for which the evidence is slight at best."

Referendum?

Most of those who propose the need for a referendum on electoral reform do so on the basis that the voting system represents a "fundamental Canadian value". If so, why was there no referendum when the franchise was extended to women, first nations and prisoners?

Referendums invite mischief and misinformation campaigns. Witness the absurd claims and counterclaims that were made during the BREXIT "debate". Now that the decision has been made, there is no mechanism to hold those responsible, on either side, for their mendacity.

And in British Columbia, a misinformation campaign on electoral reform is already underway. Former Premier Ujjal Dosanjh misquoted Winston Churchill by claiming he said that "first past the post is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time". Mr. Dosanjh claims that he was "paraphrasing" Mr. Churchill who actually said, "democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time". In fact, Churchill was a well know and outspoken supporter of Proportional Representation. On 02 June 1931 he said, "Having to choose, as we shall have to choose if we are to redress the constitutional injustice, between the Alternative Vote, the Second Ballot and Proportional Representation in the cities, I have no doubt whatever that the last is incomparably the fairest, the most scientific and, on the whole, the best in the public interest".

And British Columbia's electoral reform referendum in 2005 is truly ironic. The BC Electoral Reform Referendum Act stated that if support for the STV proposition was between 40 and 60%, Cabinet would decide whether it would be adopted or not. Support was a strong majority at 58% but the government of the day chose to reject the clear decision of the voters - so much for referendums!

Since we are able to put a voting system in place that will make all votes count, we must do so because a voter who votes for a losing candidate in a FPTP election is effectively disenfranchised. The franchise is a rights issue that cannot be subject to a referendum.

Please - no referendum!