

August 31, 2016

Re: Brief submitted to the ERRE Special Committee on Electoral Reform

To the Honourable Members of the ERRE Special Committee on Electoral Reform:

First, I would like to commend the present Government on its decision to prioritize electoral reform, and the Committee members for undertaking this important work. This is a matter of great urgency and I am pleased that the Government is following through on its pledge to Canadians.

In my 53 years as a proud citizen I have voted in every single federal, provincial and municipal election since reaching the age of majority. I consider it not only a right but a privilege and a duty. In that time, I have also had the pleasure of living and working in each of three different provinces for at least five years, which means that I have experienced federal elections as a voter under very different circumstances. Regardless, I have been deeply disappointed by the results of far too many of those elections, because my values and proposed solutions to national challenges have gone unrepresented in Parliament. I have been dismayed by the see-saw, action-reaction movements of successive governments undoing the policies of the previous one due to the disproportionate nature of our current, first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system.

My vote has seldom elected any member of Parliament sharing my values and ideas. In fact, in too many elections it was clear that a majority of Canadians (as measured by popular vote) flatly rejected a particular government and its policies, yet that same party still won an absolute majority of seats in Parliament, giving it complete control of our House of Commons and its policymaking power. This is not the essence of a true democracy. The antiquated FPTP system produces quite the opposite. Nonetheless I continue to vote, as I have for over 30 years, in hope of change.

*I support and strongly encourage the adoption of a proportional system.* While I have a preference for a *mixed-member* system, available evidence suggests that any form of proportionality is better than our current, disproportionate system and will result in a more engaged electorate, as well as more genuinely representative outcomes in Parliament.

The world has changed dramatically in the hundreds of years since the FPTP system was devised, but the system itself has not. It no longer serves the plurality that we as a nation have become. It is with great interest, then, that I recently attended one of the nearby Town Hall meetings on electoral reform. I was consistently struck by the fact that the relatively few who expressed their desire to maintain the status quo did so solely out of a fear of possible worst-case scenario outcomes. In months that I have been researching the issue I have yet to hear anyone state, in positive terms, any advantages of the outdated FPTP system, although potential disadvantages of switching to a more just, egalitarian and proportional system are cited. This is perhaps unsurprising, since our current system promotes voting against something we don't support, rather than voting in favour of something we do want.

An overwhelming number of modern nations use some form of proportional representation – over 80% of OECD countries, according to the OECD – and few (if any) have ever devolved into unstable banana republics, a fact overlooked by those who support keeping FPTP.

Some claim that the ballots required by a new, proportional system would be “too complicated” for Canadians to understand. The implication of this is that we are not sufficiently clever to learn how to use them. This would mean, in effect, that one of the world’s most successful economies is less capable than the vast majority of countries around the world that have installed a proportional system, including Scotland, Germany, Sweden, among other eminently stable and successful democracies.

In short, those in favour of the status quo oppose change on the basis of fear, uncertainty, and doubt, largely built on factual inaccuracies, logical fallacies and pure mythology. I have found no intellectually defensible reason for keeping the First Past the Post system, only an irrational and unfounded one. Please do not be swayed by emotional arguments. To be a healthier and more robust democracy we must re-engage those who are tuning out because the current system offers them little hope of agency, only more of the same. FPTP only perpetuates and promotes cynicism and disengagement.

To keep this submission brief I will avoid reciting the many reasons a proportional, mixed-member system would be in the better interest of the country; I am sure that other submissions will do so far more eloquently. I would, however, like to add a final word about whether or not the implementation of a new system should be subjected to a national referendum.

My interest in electoral reform was first sparked by the Citizens’ Assembly of BC, where I lived during the subsequent referendum of 2004. Although it was clear that the people themselves wanted a change (the BC-STV system was specifically chosen by the non-partisan Assembly), I was shocked and dismayed that the provincial government chose to hold the Citizens’ Assembly recommendation to a far higher standard than they themselves were held. Many of the same Members of the Legislative Assembly were elected by a minority of voters in their own ridings (often far less than 51%), yet they required a “super-majority” (i.e., approval by 60% of voters overall and simple majorities in 60% of the 79 districts) in order for the referendum question to pass. The second of these thresholds was easily met, with a majority supporting the reform in 77 out of 79 electoral districts, but the overall vote fell just slightly short of the 60% requirement, with 58% of the votes supporting the change. The double standard was, in my opinion, both a travesty and a supreme irony.

So, too, is the proposal that any electoral system change be subject to a referendum in order to achieve legitimacy. This strikes me as a specious argument, since our duly elected Members of Parliament are charged with creating federal laws as a matter of course. Changing our electoral system, as you know, does not require a constitutional amendment but simply an act of legislation. Therefore, the position of the status quo supporters implies that our MPs, elected under the current FPTP system, somehow lack legitimacy.

I urge the Special Committee to recommend replacing the inadequate and divisive first-past-the-post system with a mixed-member proportional system – or indeed any proportional system – that is more modern, inclusive and reflective of the great Canadian mosaic that we as a nation have so proudly become.

Thanking you for your time and attention to this most vital matter, I remain,

Sincerely,

Ken Ashdown

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