

Submission to House of Commons Electoral Reform Committee

September 27, 2016

Joseph A. Gaetan, Burlington On

Citizens should decide on Canada's Voting Method including the option of FPTP

Summary:

Standing Order 81(16) as amended, created a Special Committee on electoral reform whose purpose was to identify and conduct a study of viable alternate voting systems, part of that process was meant to replace the first-past-the-post system. F.P.T.P is a viable voting system and has been in place for over 150 years. My brief will deal mostly with the matter of the governments stated position, which is to eliminate FPTP.

The stated principles of the electoral reform process include: increasing public confidence, encouraging voting and participation in the democratic process, fostering greater civility and collaboration in politics, enhancing social cohesion, inclusion of underrepresented groups, mandatory voting and online voting, all of which can be accomplished under the present system.

The process of electoral reform was to include a comprehensive and inclusive consultation with Canadians, through written submissions, and online engagement tools. The committee order also meant they could study and advise on additional methods for obtaining the views of Canadians, what follows is my response to the process of consultation.

The mere fact that at least five members of the committee have nothing to lose and a lot to gain by participation in this process, is a testament to the state of inclusiveness and democracy in our nation. I on one hand have absolutely nothing to gain by my participation in this process, the same cannot be said of four members of the committee. The member from Sannich Gulf-Islands and the three members of two other political parties, stand to benefit immensely as a result of a move away from FPTP.

Single-member plurality is for the good of the country; in contrast, proportional systems serve political parties themselves, particularly small and or single issue parties, that exist in the hope of achieving change emanating from an imbalance of power. Proportional representation systems lead to hung parliaments, which in turn lead to coalition governments and the accommodations inherent in forming coalition governments, which, in effect, dilutes a person's vote. I am not in favour of any government plan that would remove the crown jewel of democracy and that is my right to expressly vote for one person one person or one party.

Preamble:

Having attended one of the local Electoral Reform sessions in Burlington On, it appears that the session was designed to allow the government to say they had consulted the public on this matter. In my humble opinion the governments consultative process was flawed in that the process was really a tightly managed information sharing event hosted by our local member of parliament and a member of the Liberal political party. Upon reflecting on the process, there was no way to really express ones opposition to the government plan to do away with F.P.T.P, nor was there any opportunity to really let the government know our views on the options being considered nor whether we wish this to be put to a referendum.

James Surowiecki stated, *“The best decisions are a product of disagreement and contest, Diversity and independence are important because the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and contest, not consensus or compromise”*, he also stated, *“If small groups are included in the decision-making process, then they should be allowed to make decisions. If an organization sets up teams and then uses them for purely advisory purposes, it loses the true advantage that a team has: namely, collective wisdom.”* (Source — James Surowiecki, The Wisdom of Crowds).

I saw little opportunity for the incorporation of collective wisdom in the consultative process I attended.

Since this was announced, I have spent countless hours trying to learn more about electoral reform, I generated my own survey, I started a blog, I attended a town hall hosted by my Member of Parliament, I have responded to two government surveys on the subject, I have researched scholarly and other sources of Electoral Reform to educate myself on this important subject. I am voicing my opinion on the subject of electoral reform, as a person who has given the subject an enormous amount of thought, as a person who has voted since I became eligible at the age of 21, as a person whose political views have changed and evolved since that first vote at the age of 21, as a person who at one time has voted Liberal, Conservative, N.D.P and Green.

In the past I have voted for party and/or person. As my thinking has evolved I have given greater thought to party platforms and specifically how party platforms coincide or diverge with my views and specifically with regards to matters of conscience. I am particularly interested in how changes to our way of voting may infringe on my Charter Rights.

During the town hall session we were asked to answer a number of questions, below you will find my personal answers to these questions:

Why was it important for you to join us today?

I don't believe we need to restore the effectiveness and legitimacy of voting as it already exists in the F.P.T.P system. I don't believe Canadians are asking for this change and I believe it is a change that is being engineered by the current government. I also participated as I was eager to see if any new information would be revealed that would alter my informed opinion on the subject.

What idea did you hear today that you think could inspire more Canadians to participate in our democracy?

I did not hear anything today that would inspire more Canadians to vote, in fact I believe the opposite is true and that many attendees were nervous about the changes the government is pursuing. I did not hear anything that made me believe this was nothing more than a public relations exercise and my impression is that the town hall meeting, was not a legitimate consultation on Electoral Reform.

The goal of achieving greater voter turnout is often used to justify Electoral Reform. Statisticians commonly state that, "Correlation does not imply causation". Australia has had compulsory voting for decades and has had a voter turnout over 90% since 1946. Italy on the other hand abandoned compulsory voting in 1992 and voting turnout in that country since that time has dropped 12% and in 2013 stood at 75.19% versus 87.44% in 1992. In general, since 1992 voter turnout among the G7 nations has dropped about 11 %, except for the United States of America where voter turnout over that period has dropped by 35%. The problem is not, not enough people are voting, the problem is, not enough people feel the need to vote.

The exception to voter turnout is Australia, that country has had compulsory voting since 1946 and a voter turnout consistently above 90% since that time. Among developed nations irrespective of whether they have FPTP or PR or a combination of the various options being considered, voter turnout around the world has decreased since 1992. There are some exceptions of course, The Bahamas for instance a country with FPTP, has had a voter turnout of over 90% since 1992. The Bahamas also have a ban on vote buying and legal provisions for mandatory referendums at the national level, something Canada should consider as part of its Electoral Reform process. (Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (www.idea.int))

What does healthy democracy mean to you?

A healthy democracy is one in which we are allowed to expressly vote for a person or party of our choosing, it also entails being allowed to speak your mind freely and to be listened to by the government in power. Voting is one piece of the democratic puzzle and what we do and say between elections is as important if not more so than the vote itself, but only if the government of the day is genuinely prepared to listen to the electorate. If the government of the day really believes in democracy, their start position would not include declaring the demise of the time honored F.P.T.P. way of voting.

The Liberal platform of 2015 politicized this important matter when its platform contained the following statement, " We are committed to ensuring that 2015 will be the last federal election conducted under the first-past-the-post voting system ". (Source: Liberal Website <https://www.liberal.ca/realchange/electoral-reform>).

In other words, if you believe the FPTP system that has served us for over 150 years should continue to do so, don't bother voicing your democratic opinion, because the current government or at least the Prime Minister will not listen to you and that is not democratic, it is autocratic.

Do you have any additional thoughts you would like to share with us?

The session I attended took place in Burlington Ontario and I may have missed it but I do not recall any mention of completing a survey on Electoral Reform. Since that time, I became aware of two government surveys on the subject of Electoral Reform. I also noticed that one survey omitted (Men), as a group, citizens could most identify with. If the government is trying to be inclusive, Men and Women each make up about half of the population and hopefully this was an oversight.

I have one main objection to any change away from our current FPTP way of voting and that is, there is no case for this change. During the 2015 federal election campaign, the Liberal party asked the citizens of Canada to weigh in on 106 platform items, 187,132 Canadians chose to do so. A number of those items had to do with how we elect our government. Canadian citizens were encouraged to “have your say” and they did, of the 106 items: 1,692 Canadians had their say about “fair elections”, 1,830 were concerned about “political financing”, 1,119 had their say about “free votes”, 652 had their say about “easier voting”.

If the platform website is a proxy for what Canadians wanted to have their say on, the item that most visitors shared their voice on was Marijuana at 42,017.

When it came to voicing their opinion on Electoral Reform, a mere 4.3% of the 187,132 visitors chose to have their say on this subject. If one were to consider that the survey in a likelihood contained partisan bias, electoral reform is clearly not something Canadians desire and therefore there is no case for eliminating FPTP. (Source <http://www.liberal.ca/realchange/fair-elections/>)

Our personal vote is our chance to “have our say”, it is indicative of what we value and what we will not tolerate. “All” votes count and not in a numerical manner. Any system that would force a person to place an X, a mark, or a number beside a party or candidate whose platform or stated position would infringe on their freedom of expression or conscience would, in my humble opinion, constitute a violation of their Charter Rights and Freedoms.

Tommy Douglas the former Premier of Saskatchewan, is commonly known as the Father of Medicare. In 2004 the CBC launched The Greatest Canadian television program, a series meant to determine who is the greatest Canadian of all time. Tommy Douglas was one of the ten finalists and was ultimately chosen by the public to be the winner. Many people who support changes away from FPTP base the need for change on the falsehood that their vote does not count. Premier Douglas was not a member of parliament, but his idea of Medicare received the attention of many Canadians. The idea and implementation of a National Medicare program did not originate with the Liberal or Conservative parties, in fact the first implementation of public hospital care in Canada was at the provincial level, in Saskatchewan in 1947 and in Alberta in 1950, these efforts were led by the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the Social Credit party respectively.

Some people who advocate a different way to vote, believe it would result in a better more inclusive Canada. What these people appear to be really saying is, without such a change we would never have had Medicare in Canada. The U.S.A also has an FPTP system, but alas they do not have anything close to our Medicare system and probably never will and the reason has nothing to do with FPTP. The point being, parties and people in this country do have a great deal of influence on how this country is run, even if their party never forms the government of Canada. I believe any party has the ability to be in government or at least is able to influence government, but what keeps them out of power is their platform. Many people in the province of Quebec were upset about a number of things and this gave rise to the Bloc Québécois. Today the people of the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan have reasons to be upset with the current government and an Alberta or Saskatchewan party would probably have a different voice if they chose to do as many Quebecers did. Serious matters of our nation can and have been handled for over 150 years by our current and effective FPTP system.

Recommendations:

- (1) Democratically speaking, there is no proven or evidenced based case for doing away with FPTP. Canada is doing just fine with the current F.P.T.P. system, any perceived democratic deficiencies that may exist, could be fixed in other ways.
- (2) Depending on the direction the government takes, the proposed changes many require changes to the Constitution Act and any such change must be considered by the Special Committee.
- (3) On a personal level, being forced to rank a person or party may violate my charter rights of conscience and freedom of speech and the Special Committee should pay attention to this aspect of ranked ballots or any other method that forces a person to vote against their conscience.
- (4) The government, must go to the people by way of referendum, before doing away with the FPTP way of voting. With regards to a referendum on the matter of electoral reform, some of the arguments against a referendum is that this is a complicated matter, indeed it is, and all the more reason to fully explain the necessity for change. Any system that is being considered as a candidate to replace our current and very effective FPTP requires complete transparency and full disclosure. FPTP works, is easy to understand and should remain in place.

Respectfully submitted,

Joseph A. Gaetan
Burlington On

Government Surveys:

1 <http://www1.canada.ca/en/contact/survey.html>

2 <https://survey-sondage>

hoc.parl.gc.ca/TakeSurveyPage.aspx?s=0d6f61512d6a49108ec8370a88135ce7&tsid=cbe5d4b5ef8b41d691403e19916d10c2&c=en-CA

Links to my Survey and Electoral Reform Blog:

<http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/2770726/Electoral-Reform-Voter-Sentiment-Survey-2016>

<https://electoralreform.wordpress.com/>