# An Ordinary Citizen's Viewpoint on Electoral Reform

The following are my strongly held ideas on possible changes to our voting system. Over the summer, I heard a few MPs say that they wanted to hear the opinions of ordinary people on the topic. I consider myself an ordinary person, except that I am perhaps more interested in this issue than the average person.

Although the voting system is not responsible for all of a country's problems, it nonetheless plays an important role. Our current voting system is responsible for who you are and who you become—you, our elected officials. If young people are shaped by their travels, this voting system transforms the well-intentioned people that you are upon your arrival in the political arena into power-hungry people who will do anything to prove they are right. It's as if an evil spell were cast upon you, making you forget your desire to improve the living conditions of your fellow citizens.

When a setback occurs, we merely have to listen to the disparaging comments of the politicians against people in other parties to understand that we are not in a collaborative environment working to advance the well-being of our population, but are instead competing fiercely to be in power. Some will say, as I heard from one of your witnesses, that this is the very nature of politics. In my opinion, our electoral system is a significant factor in all of this because it is truly, as I heard once again from one of your witnesses, a question of the "winner takes all." But I will expand on this topic a bit further on and talk instead about some of the thoughts I have had since listening to the discussions in July and August.

When I hear that a referendum must be held to change the voting system because it belongs to the voters, I cannot help but think that I have been voting under this system for about 40 years and have never felt much pride in marking my X on the ballot or in the fact that I was using MY voting system. The decision makers did not hold a referendum 150 years ago to determine whether people wanted this voting system, which came from overseas. Given that only 3% of the Canadian population has followed the work of your committee to date, only 3% knows for certain that members of Parliament are elected according to the plurality principle. So, are you really going to ask 100% of the population to provide input on a problem that it does not know it has? Is this really taking the matter seriously or is it a question of maintaining the status quo that serves you well?

In my view, if a referendum has to be held, I would opt for the formula that was mentioned a few times during meetings with the experts. Specifically, after a model is approved by our legislative assembly, people would have two elections in which to decide whether they feel that our democracy is working well under this new model or whether we want to return to first-past-the-post (FPTP).

If the House voted in favour of holding a referendum prior to implementing the selected model, the question would have to be phrased in a manner consistent with the principle of representativeness, for example: "Trends show that less than 50% of the Canadian population elects the party in power in the House of Commons under our current system. Under a proportional system, more than 50% of the population would be represented by the elected members in the House. Which system do you want?" If this wording is not appropriate, it could be reworked while still respecting the basic concept of representativeness.

Since the population does not know it has a problem, before even talking about a referendum, why change things, you ask? Because, as another of your witnesses said, we are not consistent in life. We do not always succeed in clearly identifying what is not working. Ordinary citizens will not clearly tell you from the outset that the current voting system is defective. But they will instead make the following types of remarks:

- Whether I vote or not doesn't change anything. The winner in my riding is a foregone conclusion;
- Liberals or Conservatives, it's the same thing; they just toss the ball back and forth;
- Political parties only think of themselves; they use our money to stay in power;
- It's annoying; what the politicians say is meaningless.

What needs to be understood from these remarks is that ordinary citizens feel their votes do not count for much and that if there were greater representation by MPs from other parties who had some power, then new ideas could be brought to the table. Under some form of proportional representation, there is no place for meaningless words spoken solely to support a party line, because the objective is to move projects forward together as a political class with a mandate, not block projects to prevent your opponents from scoring a goal and make them look bad.

Ordinary citizens cannot imagine at this point in our history—no more than the witness to whom I referred earlier—that politics can be something other than a cockfight because they have never experienced anything else. "It is the nature of politics to be partisan," this witness said. Yes, I do believe that when we defend ideas, tempers may flare. But if our electoral system allowed us to better defend an idea for the well-being of the entire population, rather than to please the grassroots and get re-elected, everyone would perhaps be more willing to compromise, to look at and consider the other person's idea, and thus adopt legislation while thinking about the long term rather than thinking only about getting re-elected in the next election.

The political culture! It affects you very personally. It's not easy to change one's way of looking at things and to think and act differently. But you must not forget why you went into politics: you believed that you could make a difference. That's not all: you must persuade your colleagues who are not members of the Committee that they too are there to make a difference.

I'm not trying to say that in countries where people vote under a proportional voting system (80% of OECD countries) that everything is perfect, but rather that it is not acceptable when only 39% of people across Canada are represented in the House of Commons.

Carole Bézaire
Ottawa-Vanier
September 7, 2016