

BRIEF BY SAMUEL LECLERC  
TO THE COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

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## **Introduction**

I believe the Committee already has access to all the information it requires to make an informed decision on the various options for voting systems, as well as their impacts. Many countries in the world and in the West have different voting systems than ours, and it is therefore possible to conduct statistical studies of their impacts. I could take the time to quote studies supporting my preferred voting system, but I am sure that you have already read or met with the specialists that I would name.

I will therefore write an opinion piece rather than an informational text, in the hopes that this is what you are expecting of me. Given that I am writing this brief on my own behalf and not for a group, I allow myself a very personal approach.

## **My voting history**

I am a Canadian citizen by birth. I am not part of any visible minority (I am a man, I am white, and my ancestors settled in Quebec approximately 400 years ago). I am 28 years old. After 10 years of voting, I haven't "won" a single election. Let me explain that: the candidate for whom I have voted has never been elected, and the party that candidate represents has never formed the government. As a result, I feel like I am Canadian if we're talking about the territory where I live and about my culture, but I don't feel in any way connected to my government. I did not elect it, it does not represent me, and I really do not approve of all its policies.

## **To vote or not to vote?**

I have seriously wondered in recent years whether I should just abstain from voting altogether. For me, this is a philosophical and ethical question. If the government represents Canadian citizens, then, as a citizen, I am theoretically responsible for its actions. But if we have a government that represents the exact opposite of my values, how do I indicate my dissent? How do I avoid being responsible for actions of my government that go against what I stand for?

The most convincing argument I've heard came from one of George Carlin's shows:

I believe if you vote you have no right to complain. People like to twist that around, I know. They say if you don't vote you have no right to complain, but where is the logic in that? If you vote and you elect dishonest and incompetent people and they get into office and they screw everything up, well you are responsible for what they have done, you caused the problem, you voted them in. You have no right to complain. I, on the other hand, who did not vote, who in fact did not even leave the house on election day, is in no way responsible for what these people have done and have every right to complain as loud as I wanted at the mess you created that I had nothing to do with. — George Carlin

Putting aside the question of the honesty and competence of our elected officials, the fact remains that if I vote, there is a good chance that my vote will not send any representative to the House of Commons, but will further legitimize those in power. By participating in the exercise, am I not acknowledging the legitimacy of the electoral system? On the other hand, if I don't vote, my (in)action can be interpreted as

indifference or, worse, as a blank cheque, as if I am refusing to vote because I don't care about the outcome. Also, not voting distorts the profile of the political opinions of Canadians, which is drawn from votes cast.

I don't want to be a slacker; I don't want to close my eyes to my responsibility as a citizen or to the country's political future. On the other hand, the current system (first past the post) makes me feel like I'm legitimizing the government in power, even if I vote against it. Well, not agreeing with the government is the lot of many, if not most, Canadians. By definition, it is the result of a diversity of opinions.

### **Diversity of opinions**

Speaking of the diversity of opinions, it appears to me that Canada is a divided country, from the standpoint of opinions. In Quebec, for example, there is not complete agreement on sovereignty, nor on language, reasonable accommodation, tuition, austerity, etc. Nationally, I think there are even more issues, more opinions and more disagreement.

If we assume that democracy means one citizen = one vote, then the question arises: should a political opinion (a party) be in the majority in a government when it is not in the majority among the people?

### **Portrait of the voters in my circle**

I know you have a survey and I hope it will provide you with better information. Just in case you are unsuccessful in obtaining the participation of the average citizen, the following is a portrait of the voters I have observed around me.

There are people who don't vote. They feel a little guilty, but they have other things to do, and they don't really see what difference it makes.

Most people do vote, though. No one is a member of a political party. Some always vote for the same party, and have done so for years. A number of people vote to block the party they fear most. Those same people say that no party represents their interests. But they aren't familiar with the platforms of the parties running for election in their riding.

During an election campaign, the most motivated will review the platform of the party they're considering voting for, and read the CV of the candidate representing that party in their riding.

In conclusion, people are poorly informed. They feel they have a duty to vote, and most do. They hope for a major change every time, but don't actually believe it will happen. When asked about their political aspirations for Canada, they can't answer. They know the names of the parties, but rarely their platforms. They know the candidates on the signs. They vote for a charismatic leader, or for a party. I haven't met anyone who has voted for a candidate. There is a general lack of interest in political issues. People avoid talking about it because it's a source of conflict or it's complicated. However, they would love to have a unifying leadership, a social project. The Quiet Revolution is often mentioned

nostalgically. People have the impression that politicians are not there to serve the average citizen, and that all parties are the same.

### **Critique of the current voting system**

Our current voting system is simple when it comes to casting a ballot, but complex in terms of the results it can give. We should know and understand concepts like: false majority, the wrong winner, potential abuse in drawing constituency boundaries, and strategic voting. Most citizens are not familiar with all these concepts. And when they are given an explanation, many see them as aberrations. I think that's wrong. In fact, they are characteristic of this system, which is actually very consistent. I don't believe, however, that it is in keeping with Canadians' political culture, which has changed over time. That's why the results can seem so strange.

I think the first-past-the-post voting system works very well when there are only two political streams (two parties) among citizens and when people come from small communities where they personally know the candidates. It is also consistent with the idea that Canada is a federation made up of member regions. I think that these three concepts no longer apply. Canada has more than two political parties and most people can't name their constituency or their MP. They do consider themselves Canadians, however, which means they are citizens of a modern country rather than a federation.

### **A bad reform**

The reform must be done right the first time because people will have no interest in a reform to correct the reform. Majority voting should be avoided. I believe the worst move would be to add a preferential element, as in the "alternative vote" system. I think the purpose of such a system is to eliminate "strategic voting," but it doesn't work and it has the perverse effect of "forcing" people to vote for parties other than the one they want. Statistics can then easily "lie" and claim that people "voted" for their third or fourth choice. The only true choice is the person's first choice. Everything else is just to avoid strategic voting, and, as mentioned above, it doesn't work. In other words, in this voting system, people might gain by voting (first choice) for a party other than their favourite, in order to block a third party.

There is also the complexity of the system. Most people I know have a hard time finding one party they want to vote for. Asking them, for the sake of voting in accordance with their interests, to learn about all the parties and what they are proposing and how close they are to the voter's personal values is completely out of step with the average Canadian's level of political interest. Moreover, from what I have understood from examples of the alternative vote system, when people are authorized to vote for only one party (usually it will be the party that determines the second and subsequent choices), most of them do it.

### **The reform I want to see (Conclusion)**

I think Canada should adopt a proportional representation system that aims for a relatively high level of proportionality. I don't care about the precise voting system, as long as it leads to a proportional result.

In other words, as much as possible, parties should be represented in the House of Commons in proportion to the first-choice votes they received. For example, if the Liberal Party is the first choice on 39% of the valid ballots, it should have 39% of the seats in the House of Commons.

The benefits are many. I believe that this voting system corresponds to how most Canadians already vote. They simply vote for their favourite party. The government resembles the result of the vote. Ballot counting is simple. And no need to vote strategically. There are a number of voting systems that provide for proportional results while allowing constituencies and territorial representation to be maintained.

Some reform to the political culture is in order, however. A policy of confrontation no longer makes any sense. Concepts like “official opposition” are obsolete. The parties are not elected to make war, but to govern the country together. Differences of opinion in the House of Commons are a reflection of the differences of opinion among Canadians. This ensures that legislation reflects Canadians’ opinions and requirements. Parties and politicians should cooperate and bring forward legislation that will receive majority support in the House of Commons, knowing that a majority in the House probably means a majority among Canadians.

I think this solution has what it takes to eliminate at least some of the political cynicism that currently afflicts us. If voters had a higher opinion of politics, they might vote more.

### **Take the reform even further (post-conclusion)**

I have already covered the essentials of the reform I think is possible. But there is one point I would like cover with regard to the role of our members of Parliament.

### **On the bizarre role of our members of Parliament**

Some things about our current electoral system are really mixed up.

First, with the same vote, we designate a party and a candidate. However, some people vote for a party, others for a candidate. The latter rail against the party line, which muzzles their MP, while the former complain about MPs who win their seats while affiliated with a party, and then become independent but retain their seats. For the system to be consistent, it should be one or the other. Either we elect only independent candidates who cannot be affiliated with a party (unless we find another way to ensure that no party line is imposed on them), or we elect only parties and all successful candidates must be affiliated with a party and be bound by a party line. The idea is that people should be able to express a clear vote, for a single entity, and hold that entity accountable. Right now, members can blame the party, and vice versa.

Secondly, we ask our members of Parliament to represent their constituencies, but also to legislate for the common good. I think this creates a conflict of interest. By definition, the individual interest and the public interest may conflict, right? In other words, federal and regional interests may not be the same. This is precisely why we want regional representatives defending our interests.

## **Sorting it all out**

We could create two separate and distinct roles.

First, there would be the ombudsperson (we could obviously come up with another title), who would take on all the MP roles related to the constituency. This person would not be allowed to be affiliated with a party. His or her role would be to represent the citizens and the constituency in general to the government.

Then there would be members of Parliament, who would always be affiliated with a party and bound by a party line. They would take on the MP roles related to governance: drafting and reviewing legislation, forming a cabinet, serving on special committees, etc.

The logic behind this is that a country cannot be governed alone or with a regional vision. An independent member has no place at this level. However, someone who is known to citizens and has their trust would be designated to represent them to the government. This person does not require a large team, nor a vast Canada-wide platform.

## **A voting system to accomplish all that**

With a voting system very similar to the compensatory mixed proportional system, we could have it all. It would operate as an open-list ballot. People would use the same ballot for two separate votes: one for the ombudsperson of their choice; and one for the party they want to be in power. The ombudsperson would be elected by a simple majority vote (with or without a preferential element), and the party would be represented proportionally in the House of Commons. Party candidates would be chosen from a closed list for the sake of simplicity, and would all be bound by a party line. Regulations could impose rules on parties to ensure that the list includes certain elements necessary to the common good (representation of minorities and women, election rather than appointment, etc.)

Thank you for taking the time to read this brief. I hope that it will prove useful for your work.