



Canadian Union of Public Employees

Submission to the Standing Committee on
Electoral Reform

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CUPE

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Introduction

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) is Canada's largest union, with over 639,000 members across the country. CUPE represents workers in health care, emergency services, education, early learning and child care, municipalities, social services, libraries, utilities, transportation, airlines and more.

CUPE members are active in their local communities, and involved and engaged in political action. Our national union engages in public policy and political matters on a regular basis, as do our provincial divisions and our union locals. Our members are proud of our union for being a social union, and provide us with a mandate to be active and engaged in issues of significance on their behalf. At our last National Convention, held in November 2015, CUPE members considered the federal election cycle that we had just come through. While celebrating the end of the Harper government, our members were deeply concerned that once again, Canada had elected a majority government with the support of less than forty percent of the votes cast across the country. After extensive consideration and internal consultation, we are asking the Special Committee on Electoral Reform to recommend Mixed Member Proportional Representation (MMPR) to the House of Commons as part of their report.

We have not come to this decision, nor do we make this recommendation to the Special Committee, lightly. CUPE has a long history of political engagement and activism. On the issue of electoral reform, we have had spirited debates within our union, both during this consultation phase, and in the past.

In Prince Edward Island, for instance, CUPE PEI joined the PEI Coalition for Proportional Representation following the adoption of a resolution at their provincial convention.

In 2007, CUPE Ontario supported the proposal for electoral reform brought to a referendum. They urged their members to "Vote Yes to MMP" after broad consultations with members and locals.

CUPE members discussed electoral reform at our 2015 National Convention and decided that there was a need for it – based in part on election commitments made by the governing party, it was time to take a firm position on electoral reform. They directed CUPE National to call for electoral reform at the federal level and to support and promote the most representative form of proportional representation, and to call for it to be implemented for the 2019 general election.

CUPE's National Executive Board considered proportional representation at their December 2015 meeting. They discussed and debated the merits of different forms of proportional representation, including Mixed Member Proportional representation and Single Transferable Votes (STV).

At their March 2016 meeting, having heard from experts and considered much available research on the subject, the Board passed a resolution in support of a mixed-member proportional representation system. That same resolution rejected ranked and preferential ballots as not truly proportional systems.

CUPE members have been interested and engaged on the topic, and many have participated in the various meetings and town halls held across the country, including some held by the committee and by the Minister. They have been absolute in their support for the twin principles of proportionality and local representation has been absolute.

CUPE would like draw to your attention the opposition day motion in December 2014, brought forward by then NDP MP Craig Scott. Sixteen (16) of thirty-one (31) Liberal MPs voted for that motion, to endorse a Canadian version of Mixed Member Proportional Representation. Clearly, there is already significant Parliamentary support for MMPR.

MMPR has great potential to bring regional representation to Parliament. Alberta has often been entirely represented by Conservative MPs in the House of Commons, even when almost forty percent (40%) of Albertans have voted for other parties. When the NDP swept Quebec in 2011, they held eighty percent (80%) of the seats, with just over forty percent (40%) of the vote. Currently, every MP from Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick is a Liberal. The Greater Toronto Area elected forty-seven (47) Liberals with 1.2 million votes. The other 1.2 million votes cast in the GTA went to the NDP, the Conservatives, the Green Party and other smaller parties – these 1.2 million votes elected three (3) other MPs. So, MMPR's biggest benefit to Canadians is that all our votes would count towards the election of MPs.

It is important to note that beyond just representation, MMPR would also help improve the quality of decisions made in Parliament – when the opinions of more voters are represented in a majority or in a minority government, in Cabinet and in committees, by duly elected Members of Parliament, better decisions are made. We think that this is of great importance to Canadians. When we have false majorities, as has been happening with some regularity, we have less diversity of voter concerns reflected in the decisions made by Parliament.

We are not intimidated by the notion that MMPR may result in more minority governments – minority governments brought in the Canada Health Act and the Canada Pension Plan – legislation that is very dear to our members. We believe that one of the benefits of MMPR is that political parties will be forced to work together, to represent the needs of more, and a more diverse range of Canadians.

Alternative Voting (and ranked ballot options)

CUPE is also firmly opposed to ranked ballots and Alternative Voting. We do not believe in replacing one dysfunctional voting system with another. Alternative Voting models appeal to many because they are simple, but that is not an argument to support them. In a democracy, it is imperative upon us all to constantly try to improve the representational and decision-making ability of our democratic institutions.

It is important to note the majority of MPs in Canada win their seat with less than fifty percent (50%) of the vote cast in their riding – sometimes a lot less. Alternative Voting systems would put an end to that but this is the only arguable advantage or benefit they offer over our current system. In fact, Alternative Voting can lead to even more distorted results than the first-past-the-post system does currently. It is not at all proportional and will not put an end to majority governments formed by a party with much less than majority support across the country.

This is not just speculation. Éric Grenier, the polling expert used by our public broadcaster the CBC, did a forecast based on available data right after the 2015 election which showed two hundred and twenty-four (224) Liberals would have been elected in an Alternative Voting system, instead of the one hundred and eighty-five (185) Liberal MPs who were elected under the current system.

We are also opposed to Alternative Voting because it does not count every vote *equally*. In fact, in almost any Alternative Voting scenario, one candidate will receive fifty percent (50%) when the votes of the bottom-few candidates are redistributed. This means the second (2nd) place candidate – who received the second (2nd) most number of first (1st) choice votes – in other words, the person who was the closest competitor to the winner, does not get counted. The citizens who voted for that second (2nd) place candidate as their first (1st) choice do not have their electoral choices represented

in either the individual MP who is declared the winner in their local riding or in the House of Commons.

It's important to note that the United Kingdom conducted a referendum on the adoption of Alternative Voting in 2011. The proposition was rejected by a clear majority of voters, precisely because of the concerns that we have outlined above.

CUPE does not believe that referendums are the *sina qua non* of democracy but we do think that that particular referendum bears consideration by the committee.

Single Transferable Voting

CUPE does not support Single Transferable Voting systems because of our concern that the fractional distribution of votes is again unequal and only leads to partial votes being counted. We do not think that a system in which votes are fractionalized up to one-eighth (1/8) of their "weight" and then counted makes for a transparent or accountable electoral process. While simplicity need not be the *first* principle of an electoral system, we think it is important that citizens understand how the electoral system works and can easily see for themselves how green party ballots were counted, and how their local election results were determined. The models for Single Transferable Voting that have been proposed to ERRE do not meet that threshold.

Referendum or not?

On the question of referenda in general, we do not support the notion that one is necessary in order to change our electoral system. We need only to consider the consequences of the most recent referendum in the United Kingdom – on whether to exit from the European Union and the litany of people who wished to recant their votes the morning after – to note that some decisions should not be made in such a manner.

In any case, in a parliamentary democracy, referenda are only ever advisory, as Parliament is the supreme and unique body authorized to pass legislation. We do believe that since the Liberals, the NDP and the Green Party, all made serious commitments to electoral reform in their platforms, and between these parties, they have both a proportional majority of electoral votes and the majority of MPs in the House of Commons, there is a popular mandate for electoral reform.

Prime Minister Trudeau is on the record commenting to the Toronto Star in June of this year that "referendum campaigns are tremendously exciting in terms of selling newspapers, but do they directly lead to better outcomes for Canadians in their electoral system? I think there's a strong argument to be made that, not necessarily." On this, we concur with him.

Conclusion

As Canada's largest union, we submit that mixed member proportional representation is the best, most democratic and most representative, choice for a new voting system. It is clear CUPE members are attached to the idea of a local MP who represents them. They are equally committed to the idea that parties should have approximately the same proportion of MPs in the House of Commons as the votes they receive across Canada. MMPR respects these twin principles – proportionality and local representation. It is indeed – as so many commentators have said, from the non-partisan Law Reform Commission of Canada in 2004 to the vast majority of Canadians who have taken the time to appear in front of the Committee in the "open mic" sessions in 2016 – the best of both worlds.

We sincerely hope that the ERRE committee can agree on a recommendation for Electoral Reform that has support from a majority of its members, and that this proposal has support across partisan political parties.

We ask that you support the introduction of proportional representation in federal elections in Canada; and that you will recommend that the next federal election be carried out under a Mixed Member Proportional Representation system.

If that were to come to pass, the Canadian Union of Public Employees would be happy to work with you to help educate Canadians on the changes to their electoral system so that 2019 would see the election of a more democratic Parliament.

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