ERRE Submission by Ryan Campbell

Executive Summary

The purpose of this submission is not to rehash the evidence presented to the committee by numerous experts, nor is it to tackle the issues of mandatory and online voting in a substantial way. The purpose is simply to outline an alternative electoral system of open-list proportional representation in small multimember districts that would meet all the committee's criteria and generally conform to the advice experts have provided to the committee. Such a system would be similar to those in use in Finland, Switzerland, Ireland and Chile. While the recommendations here may be overly specific, the hope is that the rationale behind them may help inform the committee's recommendations as a whole.

Proposal Overview

Voter Ordered Lists

Party nominations would proceed as they are right now, but rather than the current take-it-or-leave it approach, where voters can either accept the party's nominee or else vote for another party, voters would be able to choose from multiple candidates of each party. This would allow voters to express a preference not just of what party they prefer, but also what direction they would like that party to take, and would drastically reduce the power parties have over the composition of parliament through their nominations, as it would be voters and voters alone who have the final say in which candidates go forward.

An advantage of this method is it promotes big-tent parties, as the relative balance within the party between various factions is determined by voters and not internal power dynamics, and parties are able to present a diverse set of candidates in order to appeal to a diverse set of voters. If for example an environmentally minded Liberal-leaning voter could choose the Liberal candidate with a strong record of environmental advocacy rather than defect to the Greens. Voters could cast their ballot for someone more closely reflective of their views, and parties would not have to be everything to everyone, but rather reflect their true nature as diverse coalitions.

This desire to present a diverse slate has been one of the primary reasons that proportional representation has improved representation for minority groups and women, with indigenous Australians being 11 times more likely to win election to a given Senate seat in Australia than in the single member districts of the Australian House between 1970 and 2013.

It is important to look at this not as voting for parties, but rather as voting for slates of candidates, with the knowledge and consent that their votes will be pooled. The option of presenting such slates should not just be limited to political parties - if independents wish to run together and pool their votes as a slate, they should have that right, with their collective names appearing on the ballot together.

An example of this is the Free Voters in Bavaria - a slate of independents that is currently the third largest political grouping in the state legislature.

Multimember Ridings

MPs would be elected in multimember ridings of at least two MPs (except in exceptional cases) and a median riding size of between 4 and 6 members per riding. Seats would be awarded in proportion to each party's share of the vote - that is, if a party wins a quarter of the vote in a 4 seat district, they would win 1 of those 4 seats.

Sparsely populated areas would have fewer MPs per district, and more densely populated populated areas would have more due to the greater ease in travel, but the priority would be to follow natural geographic, cultural and administrative boundaries to the greatest extent possible. The priority should be to have ridings that make sense, and not have communities divided between ridings as is currently common in many parts of the country.

Some very sparsely populated areas could be left as single member districts. This is certainly the simplest and easy solution. Care should be taken to keep the number of these exceptions to the minimum though, as while the minority viewpoints in multimember districts would be expressed in parliament, in single member districts it would not, and this disparity could bias the composition of parliament towards the party most successful in those single member districts, and the interests of political parties towards the subset of those single member districts that have competitive races.

While Canada's geography is unique, only a small portion of current ridings are larger than continental European norms. The largest electoral districts in Europe - which correspond to longstanding regional boundaries - are the Finnish district of Lapland and the Swedish district of Norrbotten - both just under 100,000 km2. Only 25 seats in Canada are larger than 50,000 km2.

It may seem daunting to many MPs to represent a larger geographic area, even if their base of support and focus would be more restricted, the reality is that many MPs currently have far larger ridings to represent. Nathan Cullen's riding of Skeena-Bulkley Valley is over 300,000 km2, so unless MPs less dispersed feel they are less capable than Cullen, or that the residents of Skeena-Bulkley Valley are poorly served, it is difficult to see geography as an insurmountable barrier.

Additionally, the largest lower house electoral district in the world is Greenland, which at 2,166,086 km2 is even larger than Nunavut, and it elects 2 MPs to the Danish parliament using proportional representation.

Ideally, boundaries would be decided by a boundaries commission much as they are today. However, for the sake of expediency with the upcoming 2019 election, it may be desirable to limit the scope of such a review to simply merging existing ridings, with a more complete redistricting process following either during the next parliament or after the next census. A third option for expediency would be merging ridings on an ad-hoc basis, perhaps under the oversight of some independent body.

Maintain Existing Ballot Format

Voting would proceed exactly as it does today, only with a modestly longer ballot, as outlined in the sample ballot below.
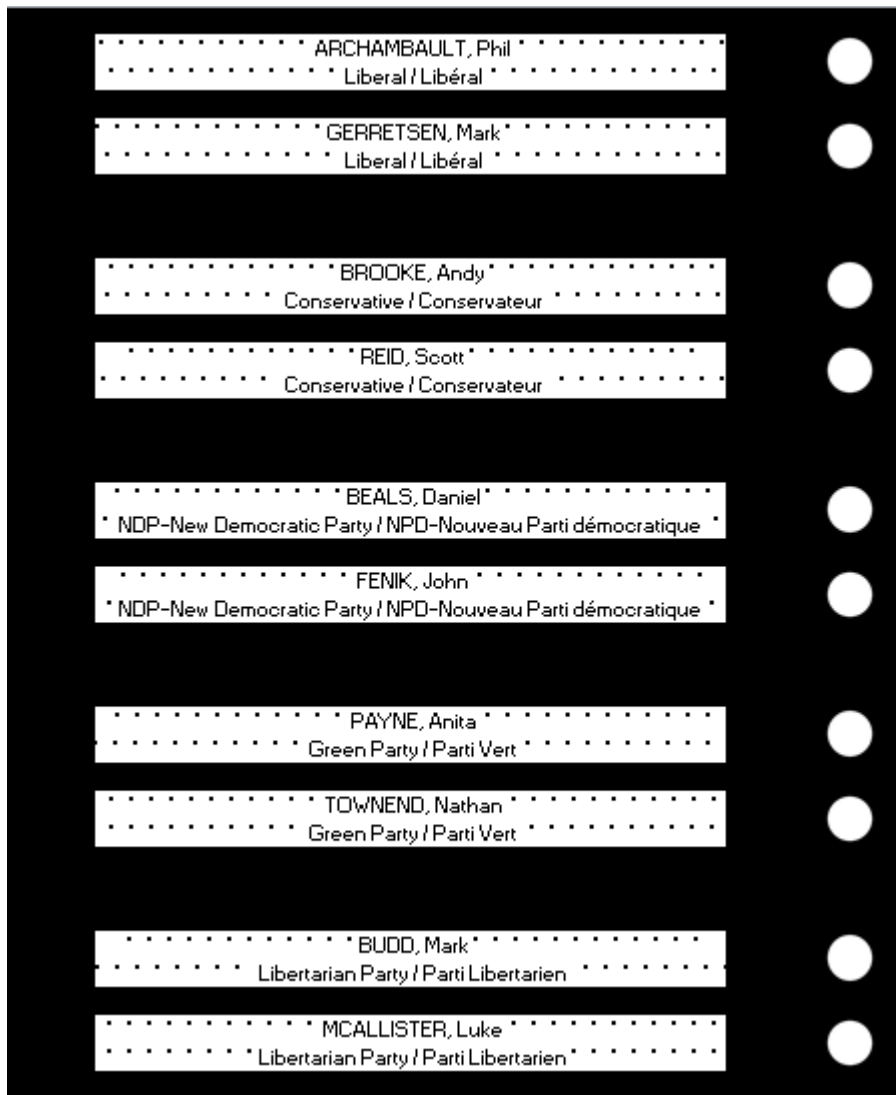
Calculating the Results in Detail

Seats would be awarded in proportion to each party's share of the vote - that is, if a party wins a quarter of the vote in a 4 seat district, they would win 1 of those 4 seats. All methods of proportional representation will guarantee a perfectly proportional distribution of seats when possible. Where methods differ is when a perfect distribution of seats is not possible. The method recommended here is the largest remainder method using the Droop Quota. While the name may sound complex, the method itself is not.

The Droop Quota is actually a concept most Canadians and all Canadian politicians are familiar with, if not by name.

In a single winner election, the minimum share of the vote required to guarantee victory is 50%+1, because if you receive more than 50% of the vote, that ensures no other candidate could have a greater share of the vote than you. That share is a Droop quota. For an election with two winners, the Droop quota is one third of the vote plus one, as two candidates each receiving more than a third of the vote guarantee that there is no third candidate with more support than either of them. For three winners, it is a quarter plus one.

Seats would be awarded to each party or candidate with a full quota, and any remaining seats would be awarded to whichever parties or candidates have the largest fraction of a quota remaining.

Committee Values

Value 1 Effectiveness and legitimacy

Voters in jurisdictions with open-list proportional representation and modest district sizes score among the highest in terms of satisfaction with democracy.

Principle of Proportional Representation

A common misconception among both opponents and proponents of proportional representation is that it is specific to political parties - that a party with 25% of the vote should (or should not) get 25% of the seats, no more or less. While that is true, it should not apply exclusively to political parties, but also to any other voter preference. So if for example 30% of voters want a representative with a strong position on the environment, then that should be reflected in the House. Similarly, if 25% of voters desire a representative who will take a strong stand in support of the agriculture industry, those 25% of voters should see that reflected in the House too. Partisan allegiance just happens to be one kind of preference, and the easiest one to measure, but voters should be free to express any preference their hearts desire, and to see those preferences reflected in their legislature.

The voting system that most clearly allows this is Single Transferable Vote. Under STV, a voter supporting greater agriculture subsidies could simply rank all candidates supporting agriculture subsidies above any other candidates, regardless of which party they may be a member of. With an "open" (voter ordered) list, voters would not be able to express preferences across parties, but the within party race would effectively be a form of single-non transferable vote, a semi-proportional electoral method. So if 50% of Conservative voters prefer a candidate who supports agriculture subsidies, then that would be reflected in the Conservative caucus.

This applies to any preference, and that includes geography. Communities would still be just as able ensure their own representative sensitive to their issues by voting as such.

Value 2: Engagement

The preponderance of research suggests that proportional representation causes a small but real increase in democratic participation

While rewarding voting or penalizing non-voting may increase turnout overall, it would not address the underlying reasons for non-voting. These often very legitimate and understandable reasons for non-voting need to be addressed if Canadians are to have greater confidence in their democracy as a whole.

Value 3: Accessibility and inclusiveness

Avoiding complexity above all else is what would separate this proposal from most alternative voting systems. The ballot and voting would remain in exactly the same form as now - with the only difference being a slightly (not substantially) longer ballot.

However, unlike today it would be rather straightforward to know the effect your vote will have when you cast it - which is to help elect the candidate of your choice, or at least the most popular remaining candidate from that party. There would be little concern of wasting one's vote on an uncompetitive party or candidate. Most major parties would at least be competitive in the vast majority of ridngs, and most voters would at least have a representative of their party of choice, and ideally also the candidate of their choice. One would not have to assess the state of the local race to understand what possible impact a vote for a given candidate would have.

The relationship between one's vote and the national results would also be far clearer, as the national vote total would more be reflected in the seat total. Voters would see the impact of their vote, and not just the votes of those in swing ridings. If parties receive 45%, 35% and 20%, respectively, it would be a difficult to predict what share of seats each party would garner without additional information. With a more proportionate system, it would be as simple as each party receiving roughly its share of the vote in seats, with a slight edge to the largest party.

It's questionable of how much value avoiding undue complexity is though. Jurisdictions using rather intimidating ballots often have higher turnout and fewer rejected ballots than Canada. For example, the most recent Dutch election saw 74.6% turnout and 0.4% rejected ballots using a ballot the size of a poster.

Inclusiveness with respect to gender would especially increase, as the diversity of a party's nomination process would be transparent to voters, and any efforts to improve diversity would be more effective. Currently, if a party decided that half its candidates should be women (which they should), the question remains which seats they should come from. Now, women could be nominated in every riding without excluding anymore.

Value 4: Integrity

The process of voting and of counting votes would not need to change in any way from what is currently used. There would be no change in either direction on this value.

Value 5: Local representation

Similar systems are noted as been extremely local-focused, with a strong geographic structure to candidate and party preference. As the results are proportional with respect to geography too, communities would be electing their own MPs in much the same way as today, only as a subset

of a larger riding. What exactly local means would be defined to somewhat greater extent by voters rather than boundary commissions though.

Consequences for Voters

For voters, the only real consequence would be a greater degree of choice at the ballot box, and a greater degree of control over the composition of the House of Commons.

The distance to nearest constituency office would either remain the same or decrease, as successful candidate would be geographically distributed roughly as they are today, while current riding boundaries can force people living on the edges of a riding to travel to more distant constituency office simply because their closest office is actually in a neighbouring riding.

One example of this would be the community of Cumberland House in Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River. The closest constituency office in their riding is in La Ronge - roughly a six hour drive away. To reach that constituency office a resident of Cumberland House would drive through the town of Nipawin roughly two hours and forty five minutes into their journey. If that resident took a look to his or her left as highway 55 turns to the north in downtown Nipawin, he or she would glimpse a constituency office for the riding of Prince Albert, before continuing another three and a quarter hours on their journey.

Consequences for Politicians and Activists

Politicians and political activists would face greater inconvenience, as travelling between events, or to meetings and campaigning in general would require more travelling time, though the total amount of these activities would remain mostly the same.

However, by switching to what is generally considered a more candidate-centred system than first past the post, evidence shows that politicians will be treated more as individuals rather than representatives of a political party. In practice, this means a modest increase in incumbency, and while incumbency in and of itself isn't necessarily a good or bad thing, Canada is noted as having one of the lowest incumbency rates in the developed world. If Canadians want a competent and effective legislature, they need to allow experience to accrue over multiple terms for parliamentarians and their staff. Some increase in job security is warranted.

 If the committee would prefer to keep the contest exclusively in single member ridings while still achieving results more reflective of parties' share of the popular vote, members of the committee should examine the electoral system in use for state elections in Baden-Württemberg. However, without multimember constituencies, gains in demographic diversity (ie better representation of women) or in incumbency from more candidate-centred elections should not be expected.

Consequences for Political Parties

In the broadest sense, compared to the status quo political parties would gain seats where and when they are weak, and lose seats where and when they are strong, muting the wild variability in party standings

Existing political parties could face additional competition from new parties, but the likelyhood of this should not be overstated. While it's likely that new parties would emerge in the future, that is also true under the status quo, as has been the case in the past. In New Zealand, out of 121 MPs, only 4 MPs are members of political parties that had not achieved proportional representation. The remaining 117 seats are all held by parties that were present in parliament prior to changing electoral systems.

More significant would be the change in distribution of results, with a balance more reflective of voter's preferences, and a more even regional distribution in seats. Never again would any party be able to claim to be the sole voice of any region, and new parties, if they emerge, could emerge as national parties rather than going through transitions as regional parties.

Notably with current polls, the distribution of seats between parties would not change significantly from the status quo. Liberal loses due to increased proportionality would be entirely (or more than entirely) offset by the increase in Liberal popularity since the election.

This is a unique opportunity. No party's majority or seat total is threatened by reform. No politician's seat is threatened even. This can be done without costing anyone their job. These conditions will not persist forever. Please act now.

Consequences for Government

The outcome based consequences of such reforms should not be overstated, however, studies show that while the adoption of proportional representation tends to reduce government spending, while the increased fracturing of the fracturing of the political spectrum induced by proportional representation tends to increase government spending. In this case, with relatively small riding sizes and details favourable to maintaining larger parties, the increasing fracturing would be minimal. Overall, the effect on government spending would be unclear. However, in all cases proportional representation is associated better development scores in areas like health, education and quality of life.

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