

Dear members of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform,

I am writing to you today to express my support for changing the electoral system as proposed in your mandate. I am not an expert on voting systems, but I have taken the time to read about alternative options, as well as taken the time to listen to people who would advocate keeping our current system. As I have learned about the available options I have formed the opinion that we must adopt a more proportional system, with my personal preference being STV, the Single Transferable Vote. In this submission I will discuss some items pertaining to your mandate letter, specifically discussing principle #1, "Effectiveness and Legitimacy" as well as principle #5, "Local Representation," after which I will briefly discuss my preferred system: STV.

The Limitation of SMP Local Representation

The effectiveness of one's vote coupled with deficiencies in the Local Representation provided by Single Member Plurality (SMP) is my primary reason for advocating changes to how we elect representatives. I have voted in every election since I was of age, and not once have I successfully elected a Member of Parliament. While it is true that I may reach out to my MP and they may choose to represent me, I have not had reason to ever do this for an issue of personal significance. I have, however, reached out on issues of national significance (such as this one) without anything beyond a form letter in reply. The problem is that when issues are politically charged or partisan, an MP is often compelled to vote in a way that is consistent with their personal and party's views and not necessarily take into account all of their constituent's views. Whether that is because of the party whip enforcing party position or because a party's caucus holds greater influence and access to my MP's heart and mind is irrelevant, the simple fact is that a single MP only has a single vote in the House of Commons, and they cannot ever hope to represent more than a fraction of their constituents in any vote. If the only reason Canadians needed representatives in Ottawa was to represent them on issues affecting them personally, then any MP dedicated to serving their constituents would do. We would not need political parties, and frankly we would not need to bother electing those people at all when a local constituency office could hire a qualified representative and fire them when they performed poorly. But this is not the purpose of the House of Commons, and this is not how things work. Constituencies are filled with diverse constituents holding diverse views, and The House of Commons needs to reflect this diversity in its composition. The effectiveness of one's vote is diminished by resulting in a single elected MP, and this is the biggest problem that a new voting system should aim to correct.

The second biggest problem is propensity towards strategic voting. However, any system which elects multiple representatives in a riding or region provides some measure of mitigation because it allows voters to express their preferences in more than one way. Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) allows one to vote for a single MP, while still taking into account a party preference, and Single Transferable Vote (STV) categorically allows voters to indicate which candidates have a greater or lesser amount of their support. Given that I am advocating a system with multiple representatives, I will not dwell on the problems with strategic voting here. However, because other options are on the table, it is important to note that one in particular, Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) also known as Alternative Vote (AV) **does** address strategic voting, but **does not** address the main issues of Local Representation outlined above.

System Legitimacy

Legitimacy is an important issue which affects both which system is selected and how we select it. In terms of a specific system, the use of AV has been widely described as unfairly favoring the Liberal Party. I would agree to a certain extent that this is true, but I would say that voter preferences depend entirely on the current political landscape which absolutely will change over time. It is not a forgone conclusion that it will always favour the Liberal party. That being said, I have observed that the public has bought into the idea that it would give an unfair advantage and as a result there would be a significant impact to legitimacy if AV is selected and voters did not feel they had broadly supported it. I personally do not feel that AV is the right choice for Canada, but I would support AV over FPTP, simply because it enhances voter choice allowing voters to clearly indicate their preferences.

Selection Legitimacy, Referenda and Broad Buy-In

Legitimacy also requires a look at how a system is selected. Parliament has previously set a precedent of not directly consulting Canadians on many changes regarding who can vote or how we vote. I am not aware of a single instance where a referendum was held to make any changes in this regard. As an example, it is my understanding that there was no referendum when FPTP was selected, the people were not given a choice between **any** number of possible options. All this being said, the government walks a fine line when they ignore calls for a referendum, because it is widely seen as an attempt to ignore the wishes of Canadians (assuming that they would vote down the change) Allowing a referendum would immediately calm these claims, but a referendum is not without peril.

- The government has promised a change, and allowing the people to vote down this change would essentially let the government off the hook.
- There is a history of inaccurate information being disseminated during referenda.
- This is a complex issue, which is not to say that the average Canadian could not make an informed decision, just that it would be difficult for them to acquire all the necessary information and confirm the accuracy of each piece of evidence.

The way the question is asked is also important, but a question such as “Do you agree with the Government’s position that the voting system be changed to the recommended Alternative Vote,” (an admittedly contrived example) is entirely inadequate. This is too complex an issue to be distilled down to a simple yes or no question. There have been many suggestions for how a referendum could be more fair and more legitimate. I will outline a few key suggestions here, not because I advocate that a referendum should be held, but instead to provide ideas in the event that you or the government deem one is required; either by law, or to enhance legitimacy.

- The referendum ballot must contain at least two newly proposed systems as options.
 - Your committee may not be able to agree on what the best system is, and this would allow the top proposals to be put to the electorate.
- The referendum ballot must be a ranked ballot.
 - Certain voters (such as myself) will prefer one system, but will be agreeable to others. We must be given the opportunity to indicate our preferences to each system.
- The referendum ballot must contain an option for a voter to indicate that they do not have enough information to make an informed decision, such as “Not Sure”

- This option can be ranked in any order, but makes the most sense to use as either one's only preference, or one's final preference.
- This option is required based on the complexity of the choices. Some voters may find that they fully understand one or more options, but beyond their first choice they do not know what is best. Allowing this choice, gives voters a chance to vote but also to defer to the judgment of others if their first choice is eliminated.
- A non-voter, is by default, deferring to the judgment of others, and allowing this option will increase accessibility, by not excluding voters who do not feel qualified to rank each and every type of system.
- Clearly if this option were to come out on top, it would be a black mark on the government's education campaign, but you would need to consider a contingency. It is likely appropriate to just move on to the second choice, knowing that very few Canadians actually have an opinion on this matter, but those who do have indicated their preference.
- In much the same way that I question if a referendum is required, I also question whether FPTP should be an option or not.
 - This certainly illustrates my bias, but if each party in this committee were to agree on a list of new systems to present in a referendum, none of which include FPTP, there would be an implicit consensus that FPTP is no longer an acceptable system for Canada, and should not be presented as an option.
 - It is worth noting that using a ranked ballot referendum, in conjunction with having FPTP on the ballot, will provide valuable data to parliament as to how well received each of the options are.
 - FPTP on the ballot will allow people who want change, but only if it is very specific type of change to voice that opinion. For example, it would allow them to indicate that they want only STV, and if not STV, FPTP.
- And finally, I raise the question if we should allow for a hybrid system where some ridings remain SMP districts based either on their referendum ridings results, or a secondary referendum question such as, "If Canada moves forward with combining electoral districts for a new electoral system, would you prefer your riding remain separate and continue to elect only 1 MP?"
 - I do not live in a riding like this, but I understand that there are many ridings that are already seen as too large to combine.
 - Could these ridings remain as STV districts of 1 MP? Essentially using an AV ranked ballot resulting a majority of voters preferring the winning candidate?

Finally, there has been so much talk about how to gauge the Broad Buy-In of Canadians without a referendum, and skepticism toward the idea that it can somehow be conducted online. I think what you are looking for is a comprehensive poll of all registered voters. I do not know what degree of access one branch of the government has to another, but I would highly recommend making use of the infrastructure built by Statistics Canada. The StatsCan website could be repurposed with a series of questions relating to attitudes towards various aspects of the different voting systems, and like the Census an access code could be sent to each participant (registered voter rather than household in this case) and a comprehensive dataset of results could be very quickly returned to the committee. Online voting can be problematic because of the issue of confidence surrounding confirmation of identity, but in this case if we consider this more of a non-binding opinion collecting poll, it would allow for directly measuring the support, but it would not be as critically important to verify the identity as it would be for an online referendum.

Single Transferable Vote and MMP

As I have previously discussed, having a single MP in a single member plurality system does not meet the needs of diverse constituents in each constituency. Obviously I do not need to explain STV to this committee so I will simply say that STV solves this problem by essentially combining multiple ridings into a single larger riding with the same total number of MP's. Voters rank their preferences and a majority of voters in each riding will successfully elect an MP that reflects their views to a much higher degree than if a single MP attempted to represent them. While this does not provide the degree of regional proportionality that can be provided by a MMP system, it does create more localized proportionality. This could make things harder for smaller parties such as the Green party. I have not run the numbers, but my instinct would be that a Green candidate could win only if they ran a strong candidate in a large riding, compared to MMP where the Green party could count on widespread support across an entire region (probably an entire province) which would entitle them to some top up seats as they had not likely won in any specific riding (notwithstanding Vancouver Island where I would assume we would see several Greens join Ms. May in Ottawa under STV). However, we do not design voting systems to be fair to a specific party, we design them to be fair to the voters. If a smaller party cannot muster enough support in a 4 or 5 member riding, then they do not have sufficient support of the electorate.

MMP is in general a system that will meet many of the needs of the Canadian voter, but my main issue with it is that we continue to elect a large number of MPs with only a plurality of the constituents in each riding. Because of this we continue to see issues with strategic voting. It would be possible to use a ranked ballot for the first half of the ballot, which I would prefer, but we would still have large distortions between what voters preferences were versus who won.

Despite my objections, I would certainly vote for MMP over FPTP if it came down to a referendum. But again we would need that referendum to be a ranked ballot, and I would absolutely pick STV over MMP.

Conclusion

Local Representation and Legitimacy are two of the most important issues you will deal with as members of this committee. You must find a way to balance the needs of all Canadians and build consensus among all the parties. If you are able to find consensus, it may be possible to avoid a referendum which is designed to query change versus status quo, but we may still need a way to identify the level of support for each of the proposed systems leveraging the work already done by Statistics Canada using the polling capabilities of the Census website.

As a regular Canadian with no affiliation to a particular political party or connection to Ottawa I sincerely thank you for this opportunity to voice my opinion during this critical moment in Canadian history. I know that this issue has been studied many times, and some of the more cynical among us will not believe that this time will be any different, but I remain hopeful. I look forward to watching and reading about the diverse views as they emerge from around the country. And most of all I look forward to the final report to parliament of this committee.

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