

Submission to the special Parliamentary committee on Electoral Reform ERRE Toronto September 20, 2016

By John Deverell, retired *Toronto Star* journalist, former president of the Southern Ontario Newsmedia Guild (Unifor), founding treasurer of Fair Vote Canada, and current member of the Green Party of Canada.

What Is The Problem Voting Reform Is Intended To Fix, And What Is The Fix?

First Principle: The cardinal principle of representative democracy is the political equality of citizens, expressed in a system of equal effective votes and the proportional representation of voters in the lower chamber of Parliament – the law-making assembly of the people’s representatives.

For 150 years Canada’s system of political representation has failed this elementary test.

Reality: First-Past-the-Post voting makes a mockery of the claim that Canada is a representative democracy. It perpetrates on Canadians, from the moment they are born here or arrive on these shores, a giant hoax.

The sad truth is that, in every election, about half the voters of Canada cast placebo ballots which elect nobody. The advocates and supporters of FPTP are sanguine about inflicting taxation without representation on half the citizenry. They display utter contempt for the plain meaning of words by calling FPTP “democratic” while denying half the adult population a right to choose its representatives in the House of Commons and hold them accountable for their actions.

Every FPTP MP who casts a vote in Parliament knows full well, each and every time, that many of his or her constituents would vote the other way. The pretence that a single legislator can represent every voter in a

geographic district fairly is illogical and dishonest. It is childish propaganda against representative democracy.

Real Change Coming? Fortunately official Ottawa has acknowledged that the voting status quo is no longer acceptable. A substantial majority of Canada's legislators committed themselves, during the last election, to an immediate and fundamental change in the method Canadians use to elect the House of Commons.

Many MPs in all parties understand that such change is necessary if the legitimacy of the rule of law is to be promoted and sustained in the minds of Canada's diverse citizenry without unwelcome, expensive, ever-rising and probably ineffective levels of state coercion.

The Trudeau government has created your committee on Electoral Reform to propose, by December 1 this year, a made-in-Canada democratic voting system.

The New Democrat Party and its MPs are offering to make every vote count: equal effective votes and proportional representation in the House of Commons. The Green Party is similarly committed to make every vote count.

The Historic Liberal Democratic Promise: In June 2015, under the Real Change banner, the Liberal Party of Canada joined the camp of the democratic parliamentary parties. Backed by a huge group of applauding Liberal candidates, Justin Trudeau stood before the cameras and said, right off the top: "We will make every vote count."

He promised to end first past the post and to introduce the necessary changes to the Canada Elections Act by May 2017.

No Referendum: Please note there was no room in that democratic timetable for punting voting reform to a referendum.

In my estimation now-PM Trudeau understood that voting reform is an issue of leadership, not followership. A basic right of democratic citizenship – an equal effective vote – should not be pitted in a referendum campaign against the poisonous and mendacious hostility of anti-democratic citizens (we have some), anti-democratic politicians (we have some of those too), or anti-democratic mass media barons and their journalist employees. (In this respect Trudeau the Younger is cut from the same cloth as his father, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, who wisely avoided submitting the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to a referendum.)

Elected politicians who understand the functional benefits of human rights, democratic inclusion and the political equality of citizens should embody those fundamental values in law if and when they have the chance. Canada's Liberal majority government, supported by the MPs of at least two opposition parties and possibly more, now has that historically unique opportunity.

Making Every Vote Count: When Justin Trudeau said: “We will make every vote count” -- and his assembled candidates applauded – he and the Liberal Party publicly renounced the Alternative Vote. The ranked ballot in single member districts is FPTP's sister on steroids – another winner take all voting system which by design leaves about half of all voters without representation in the Commons by their preferred candidates and parties.

The Alternative Vote, with which the Liberal Party flirted briefly before 2015, would be a cynical sabotage of Real Democratic Change. Prime Minister Trudeau, when he asserted that his voting reform will require more than Liberal party approval, and again when he agreed to structure your committee fairly, signalled to his partisans that the Alternative Vote /Ranked Ballot option is politically dead.

My questions to the Liberal members of the committee. First: was Justin Trudeau being sincere and honest when he said “We will make every vote count”? Were all those applauding Liberal candidates, presumably including some of you, committed with your leader to the bold and historic election promise you and the Liberal Party were making?

Second: will you join with MPs from other parties to recommend a specific system of equal effective votes and proportional representation for all Canadians -- and thus make it possible for the Trudeau government to introduce broadly acceptable voting reform legislation next May?

My question to the NDP members of the committee: You prefer a Mixed-Member Proportional voting format – but are you and your party truly opposed to FPTP? Are you truly open-minded? Are you ready to endorse and promote any voting reform which provides nearly all Canadians with an equal effective vote?

My question to all members of the committee: Will you – anticipating Canada’s 150th birthday year—eschew obstructive partisan quibbling and strive to agree on a particular way to make every vote count? Will you work mightily to make Canada, for the first time in our history, a genuine representative democracy?

John Deverell
Pickering ON