

Attached please find the summary of a meeting held on 22 September re Electoral Reform. To paraphrase one of our participants: “having this dialogue with friends and neighbors was a great opportunity to become more engaged in and informed about our democratic system.”

Results of electoral reform event

On Thursday 22nd September, Bill and Jan Johnston hosted a 3 hour discussion on Electoral Form at our home in Vancouver, Canada.

Participants were:

Bill Johnston: *Canadian diplomat (retired), Board member of Rose Charities and StreetInvest*

Leonard Schein: *Founder of the Vancouver International Film Festival, Board Member Coast Mental Health Foundation, Ecojustice, and InspireHealth.*

Margot Young: *Professor in the Allard School of Law at the University of British Columbia, specialist in areas of constitutional and social justice law.*

Kathryn Pedersen: *Counsellor, Francophone School Authority*

Alvin Wasserman: *President of Wasserman + Partners Advertising*

Kathryn Spracklin, *Manager, Strategic Planning and Policy, Legal Services Society*

Jan Johnston: *Editor, Working Words.*

Agenda for the meeting was as follows:

- Introduction to Electoral Reform Dialogue
- Alternatives to First Past the Post
- Mandatory Voting
- Referendum
- Role of the MP
- On line/Electronic Voting
- Removing Obstacles

The Chair distributed info packs outlining the various voting systems, the ERRE guiding principles, the Fair Vote Canada submission to the ERRE, the FVC “Make Every Vote Count” summary, and the results of the last election.

1. **Introduction to ERD:** The group consensus was that FPTP was not serving Canada well and that electoral reform was necessary to rebalance democratic principles, e.g. participation rates (particularly among youth), regional balance, reflecting Canadian diversity (e.g. gender, race, rural/urban split) and greater collaboration among parties/MPs.

2. **Alternative systems:**

MMP Proportional: Despite a concern that ranked ballots could disfavour smaller parties and diversity, MMP was the unanimously preferred option because of its proportional results, maintenance of local/regional representation and its relative simplicity.

AV – Majoritarian: The group rejected AV expressing concern that it benefits larger entrenched parties and doesn't give proportional results.

STV Proportional: The group considered the formula would be too complicated in terms of the thresholds for individual candidates, and that it might give unfair advantage to the major parties that would be able to field and elect more candidates, especially in larger ridings.

RU-PR Proportional: One of the major reasons for rejecting this option was the fear that it would lead to a larger government; some of the group considers that there are already too many MPs in Ottawa.

There was a discussion about the French two-round system, which was presented as the simplest system to implement (no riding changes, no multi-member constituencies, and every MP would represent a majority of voters in their riding). Those in favour argued that it allows voters to have a second chance to vote for their chosen candidate, encourages candidates from the leading parties to negotiate in areas of diverse interests which would lead to greater representation of the electorate and is easy to understand and implement. Those against felt it had many of the same disadvantages of the FPTP system and the entrenched parties would continue to dominate.

3. **Mandatory Voting:**

The general consensus was that mandatory voting is not democratic, and in fact could be unconstitutional. The group leans more towards encouragement and rewarding rather than penalizing or punishing.

4. **Referendum**

Every member of the group was unequivocally against a referendum, as there are too many collateral issues which could prejudice the public vote. As well, the election, with PR as an issue in it, is functionally a referendum, or at least a mechanism of democratic input. Similarly, the HofC committee is a democratic device.

5. **Role of the MP.** There was a general, though not unanimous, desire to see MPs being allowed to vote their conscience and reflect the views of their constituents, as opposed to party ideology through whipped votes. Support for party discipline, albeit not as tightly whipped, was evident for some.

6. **On-line / Electronic Voting.** Consensus was that the security risks were too high to recommend this approach across the board, that the current paper-based system is not broken and showing up in person reinforces a sense of democratic community and the importance of voter participation. (Reference was made to the Florida fiasco).

7. **Removing Obstacles:** Suggestions for making it easier to vote included

- Extending the current legal 3 hour allowance. One suggestion was to give a half or full day off for voting with a caveat that evidence be provided that the time was

actually used to vote, for example a stamped ticket issues at the polling station. (The group did acknowledge that this could be very costly for employers).

- Facilitating easier identification procedures, including simple neighbour attestation.
- Making the environment at polling stations less somber and more congenial.
- Siting polling stations at every public school, university and colleges.
- To encourage more youth voting it was felt that teaching civics is crucial and should be entrenched in the curriculum, both at elementary and high school levels.
- More advance polls.