

Brief regarding Electoral Reform in Canada, for the next Federal Election after 2015

I would like to thank the Government of Canada for studying the issue of Electoral Reform, and particularly those elected MPs whose political parties have committed in their pre-election platforms to ensuring that the 2015 election would be the last one to rely on a first-past-the-post system (FPTP). I also would like to thank my local elected MP Stephen Fuhr for having signed the FairVote Canada commitment supporting that a system of proportional representation be brought in, and for having invited MP Mark Holland to host a local town hall event in the Okanagan regarding electoral reform. This event was reasonably well attended, given fairly short notice, and a majority of those who attended participated in providing verbal comments, which was impressive. I personally elected to formulate my comments in writing, and I submit them now, with gratitude and respect. I wish to compliment Minister Holland on his attentive, respectful, and professional demeanour throughout the event. I was very favourably impressed both by my fellow citizens and by our attending elected representatives.

I write to express strong personal support and desire for a system of proportional representation (PR) to be enacted prior to the next federal election. I am not personally wedded to any one particular design of PR, and hope that our elected representatives will take for granted that the population does support a change to PR, given the majority of elected MPs belong to a political party which made a commitment to end FPTP elections. I view AV, or alternative voting, as just another form of a FPTP system.

Electoral reform is not a topic which will necessarily garner huge passion and attention from a majority of the population, but I would wager that, of those Canadians who do feel passionate enough about electoral reform to have researched it, there would be a majority who are dissatisfied with FPTP. When I have listened to commentary from fellow Canadians on call-in shows, such as Cross-Country Check-up, I have heard many voices calling for a more proportional system.

I don't feel that our parliamentary committee or government should put a choice of voting systems to a referendum, because I think it is a complex topic, and I would like to see vitally important choices made based on careful research and expert consultation. I fear that referenda bring out partisans in excess, and often do not in any case bring out a majority of citizens, and unfortunately not a majority of highly informed citizens. As well, referenda don't account for and offset the tendency of ingrained biases, which favour the status quo, simply because humans often tend to shy away from change or the unknown. If there is to be any future referendum on electoral reform, I would like it to be conducted several years down the road, once Canadians have experience with a new system of voting, and conducted upon presentation of relevant and vital data on whether the new system has enhanced engagement of the voting public, and especially of those currently less well-represented, both in the voting public, and in the halls of government. Even then, I would like such a referendum to be designed to tweak the new system, rather than to risk swapping back to FPTP and all its deficiencies.

As far as the system of PR that might be brought in, I'd like our expert government panel to look at the health of citizen participation rate in voting, leadership in environmental policy, and stable economy, in those countries which currently use a system of PR, and make a choice from amongst the models which seem to be most successful on these measures. Perhaps pre-

design a scoring system based on these type of parameters, and then see which country with a PR electoral system scores highest, and select that system for Canada to work with.

At the local town hall event, a minority spoke out strongly in favour of referenda on this issue, and these seemed frequently to be members or supporters of the previous elected and long incumbent MP and previous government. To me, this exemplifies exactly why referenda should be avoided: because they may favour partisanship and populism, as well as fear of change. As well, we have seen from the example set in BC years ago, how a government can select the result it wants, according to where it sets the bar for approval, as well as by how well or how poorly it works to educate and support an informed citizenry.

The number one reason I personally feel very strongly about proportional representation is because the number one issue that concerns me, as a parent, researcher, and healthcare provider, is climate change. Climate change poses an enormous threat to the future my children may be able to enjoy, as well as to the health and viability of the natural world around them. I feel very fortunate for what I have been able to experience of this world, and want the same or better for our next generations. Mass extinctions are threatened, such that we risk leaving our children a biologically impoverished and unbalanced planet, where even clean air, safe food, and water may be hard to come by. Our nation currently struggles to keep up with the costs and demands of healthcare. Climate change will only worsen this stressor, by increasing poverty and displacement, spiking rates of anxiety and depression, reducing agricultural and food security, driving up extremes of weather, creating more frequent mass losses of homes or environs, and bringing more infectious disease vectors into latitudes which previously haven't experienced them. From my understanding, countries with PR systems have demonstrably better environmental performance and policies, on several measures. Effective action for long-term protection of our environment may be politically unpopular, to begin with, and so a government less beholden to populist stances and campaigns will serve our country better.

To expand further on this particular topic of primary concern for me, climate science very clearly points out the enormous peril to our global population and all of its biospheres, from our current way of living on this planet. Yet, despite almost complete unanimity of scientific opinion on this issue (which is vanishingly rare), vested interests supporting a fossil-fuel based economy have managed for decades to obscure the understanding of the dire threat that we face, its imminence, and the unanimity and strength of scientific opinion and evidence. I believe that this obfuscation has been achieved, in strong part, because the voices of corporations and of the wealthy and highly advantaged and well connected, ring much louder in government decision-making, than is fair, wise, or proportional. As well, these voices may also dominate our media coverage, which in turn also helps shape electoral outcomes. I believe that many voters in Canada favour urgent action on climate change, and yet, we have no effective way, most of us, of electing a representative from a party which takes this issue extremely seriously, and will act based on unfiltered science. Even those parties forming a strong majority government may be so concerned with keeping that power, that they are unwilling to risk making unpopular decisions, even if they themselves feel strongly about environmental protection. A government body elected by PR has a better chance of giving such parties and their members more political cover for doing what is right and responsible.

I know for a fact that I was not able to provide my own vote to the party I see as most well informed on this most vital issue, in the last election; rather, I was forced by fear to vote strategically. Voting out of fear of the more harmful Party, does not inspire citizens to feel faith

and trust in their government, regardless of who wins out in the end. I don't feel that bringing in a system of PR is the only thing we need do, to correct the imbalances in decision-making, and to ensure a well-informed and conscientious government represents us, but I feel we will never begin to approach these goals without changing our electoral system to a proportional one. The majority of Canadians place a very high value on the natural environment, and feel that Canada's natural and wonderful places help define us, and yet we are mired in an electoral system which continuously stifles any action to protect that environment, subjugating what should be our topmost concern, to pocketbook issues and distractions.

The second reason I feel strongly in support of proportional representation is that I see plenty of evidence that it may reduce the disengagement that many Canadian electors and potential candidates may be experiencing, due to our currently unrepresentative FPTP system. I understand, from my reading, that proportional systems are likely to increase the percentage of the population voting, by increasing engagement in the voting process. As I understand it, PR systems are more likely to result in minorities (including First Nations community members, as well as migrants) and women participating in government and in voting, which is very good, to my mind. I believe a PR system would bring in more stable governments, resulting in more stable policy-making, and policy-making with a longer term view, with less likelihood of abrupt flip-flops in policy between regimes, which likely result in enormous cost and waste. I understand that there is less likelihood of gerrymandering of electoral districts, under a system of PR—also a public good, and an avoidance of waste and cost.

Some of the undemocratic behaviours of the last government gave me and many Canadians particular concern that the majority situation might be used to progressively stifle most democratic institutions and traditions, harming fairness and representation potentially permanently. Proroguing parliament, shutting down debate, interfering with judicial appointment processes, expanding the ranks of MPs, destruction of scientific research materials and closures of science libraries, redefining grant systems for science research so that it is beholden to business interests, abuse of taxpayer funds to fuel propaganda and advertisements, and muzzling and firing of independent critics, researchers, or public agencies are some examples of unilateral actions that, frankly, dismayed many Canadians, myself included. Though the current majority government actions are more to my liking, I still feel strongly that Canada should take this opportunity to bring in a system of government that is more protected against the instincts of potential future leaders and their parties, to change government systems on a whim, and motivated by partisan, rather than national, interests. A government elected via PR would present less risk of deck-stacking based on self-interest and unrestricted power.

I would like to see more focus on civics being ensconced in high school courses, and would like us to permit voting to those 16 and older. I believe that being able to vote in elections, particularly under a system of PR, would implant greater knowledge and engagement in the minds of our youth, if their educational experiences were complemented by the ability to put into practice what has been learned. We lament the disengagement of our youth, and yet contrive to infantilize them, by excluding them for too long from participation in our democracy. It is our children who face the greatest risk from poor and short-sighted decision-making, action on climate change being a prime example of why our children deserve a voice in our electoral system. Perhaps if we respected our children enough to permit them to vote, we'd better prioritize adequate funding for our educational systems, talk to our children more about issues of concern, and ourselves be more prone to take a long view when discussing party platforms pre-election.

The last major reason why I'm strongly in support of PR is because of the very ugly and harmful partisanship that is engendered by FPTP electoral systems. We need look no further than our southern neighbour, the USA, for a warning sign of how badly things can go off the rails, when rank partisanship is mixed with the distortions and amplifications of social media, or a national media which does not reflect a diversity of opinion and circumstance. We have an enormous media monopoly in Canada, with few news outlets providing any type of independent voice or commentary, and most media writers beholden to commercial interests, based on the current funding model for news organizations. Though I'm not a big consumer of social media, what I read suggests that there is a similar concentration of media penetration linked to the algorithms of Facebook, and other influential social media fora. A government that reflects a wider swathe of the Canadian public will, by nature, be less likely to invest or conspire in extremely partisan, biased, and manipulative communication strategies, and less likely to work towards a rigging of the system, toward a single slanted narrative. This can only be good for our democracy, and for our collective mental health, and for civility. I would like us to elect government members who know they will need to work together respectfully. A highly partisan system is yet another factor which works toward stifling the ability and interest of women and minorities to seek election. A less partisan proportional system will yield a government that more closely resembles and reflects the population it is meant, in any case, to be serving.

In closing, I reiterate my thanks to the representatives of our nation who are investing significant and hopefully very sincere and unbiased effort into studying this issue, and bringing forward a more inclusive, engaging, and just system of voting, which must, in my view, be a proportional representation system, to help make Canada a greater and more stable democracy. To summarize, a PR system is vital to our country behaving as it should on the world stage, with respect to environmental stewardship, and will serve to enhance more diverse and inclusive voter engagement and participation. Canada is a beacon to much of the world in many ways, but our current electoral system risks putting too much power in too few hands, representing too few Canadian voices. We can be our best by providing more of a voice to all our citizens, and more of a hope that their voice will actually be heard, and respected.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Commit to a system of PR, not just any replacement for FPTP
- 2) Devise a scoring system to evaluate citizen participation rates in electoral issues; responsible leadership on environmental protection; and healthy economic activity. Apply that scoring system to a selection of nations which have a form of PR in place. Choose a PR system to pilot in the next federal election, based on top score and a vote amongst committee members, after any necessary examination of practical issues in applying those top-ranking nations' systems in a Canadian context. Consult with knowledge experts as needed.
- 3) Avoid putting the selected PR system to a referendum, other than after an agreed upon number of federal elections (perhaps 3-4), and then, only to refine the new system, not swap it back out for the FPTP model. Collect data on factors such as participation rates generally and amongst age groups and select minorities or subpopulations of interest (whom we would like to encourage to greater representation and participation), both in voting and in running for elected office. Proactively collect data on environmental policy before and after electoral reform, as well as any other focus area agreed upon by Committee members. Consider having an ongoing committee of government to study and revise the selected

system in consultation with the relevant Minister in charge of Democratic Reform or systems.

- 4) Reduce the age for voting in federal elections to 16. Support provincial governments and parents in bringing forward relevant educational materials in middle and early secondary school programs. Support Elections Canada in encouraging and educating Canadians generally on participation.

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REFERENCES:

The Fair Vote Canada website and materials generally, including:

<http://www.fairvote.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/WhyPR-ReviewofEvidence-UpdatedJuly2016-1.pdf>

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The Right to a Healthy Environment. David R. Boyd, UBC Press, 2012

Climate change and related courses via Coursera:

Climate Literacy, provided by University of British Columbia.

Climate Change in Four Dimensions, provided by University of California, San Diego

Designing Cities, by University of Pennsylvania

Energy and the Environment, by University of Pennsylvania

Climate Change, by University of Melbourne

Greening the Economy: Lessons from Scandinavia, by University of Lund