Brief to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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Proportional Representation for a More Inclusive Parliament:
A Beginning, Not an End

RECOMMENDATION #1: *Canada should adopt a system of proportional representation to promote engagement and ensure inclusiveness amongst members of racialized groups who are systemically underrepresented in Canada's democratic institutions.*

RECOMMENDATION #2: *Parliament and the government should use electoral reform as a springboard for further study, discussion and action on addressing other systemic barriers that prevent members of racialized groups from fully participating in Canada's democratic institutions.*

It is a well-established fact that members of racialized groups are systemically under-represented in political life in Canada, with the share of racialized minorities holding elected office in Canada's Parliament, provincial legislatures and municipal councils consistently falling below those groups' share of the overall population. As the federal government contemplates reforming Canada's electoral system to fulfill its promise to make 2015 "the last election held under First-Past-the-Post," I argue that electoral reform presents an opportunity to address systemic barriers that prevent racialized groups from achieving political representation, and that adopting an electoral system based on proportional representation would have a positive impact in this regard.

One of the key determinants of the extent to which marginalized groups are able to gain access to representation in the political system is the type of electoral system that is used to elect representatives to legislatures. Specifically, the question of whether or not an electoral system is proportional is an important one, as it has been argued that proportional electoral systems have the capacity to accommodate a significantly broader diversity of views, forms of dissent, and to open up new avenues and forms of representation, especially in comparison to plurality-majority

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or "winner-take-all" electoral systems such as Canada's. Given that proportional electoral systems tend to promote cooperation over competition and to maximize the number of "winners" in the system, and given that Canada is a diverse, multiracial society that is committed to the notion of multiculturalism as official state policy, it is my belief that the adoption of a proportional electoral system for Canada would improve the underrepresentation of socially excluded racial groups in the Canadian Parliament and other legislative bodies. But while such a move would be wholly consistent with the Canadian government's commitment to multiculturalism, it should be seen as merely a first step toward an anti-racist model of combating social exclusion through the political participation process.

To what extent can the underrepresentation of racial minorities be attributed to the electoral system employed? While it is impossible to isolate the precise effects of that one variable alone, there is strong evidence to suggest that certain kinds of electoral system better facilitate diversity than others. Broadly, most electoral systems in use around the world fall into two categories: there are plurality-majority systems, which are sometimes referred to as "winner-take-all" systems, and there are proportional systems. Within each of these two families are a wide array of systems with an infinite number of design variations, however the salient distinction between the two families is that in winner-take-all systems, each individual electoral contest results in only one winner, whereas under proportional systems, each contest has multiple winners, with seats allocated to candidates and/or parties more-or-less in proportion to the share of votes they receive. Winner-take-all systems, such as the First-Past-the-Post system used in Canada, typically involve singe-member electoral districts, meaning that the only way for a candidate to get elected is to be the most popular candidate in the district. In contrast, proportional electoral systems involve multiple-member electoral districts, meaning that candidates do not necessarily have to defeat all other candidates in their district to get elected; instead they are required only to surpass some threshold of votes in order to be entitled to one of the seats up for grabs in the district. In the context of a political party system, proportional representation implies that political parties win seats in proportion to their overall share of the popular vote – something that rarely turns out to be the case in Canadian elections.

The impact of the electoral system on the prospect of more diverse legislative bodies has been fairly well documented by numerous researchers. Salomon Orellana, in his book *Electoral Systems and Governance: How Diversity Can Improve Policy-making*, states clearly on the first

page of the introduction that "countries with proportional electoral systems and more legislative parties tend to have a significantly more diverse political information environment than countries with less proportional systems and fewer parties" (Orellana 1). Others, including electoral reform experts Henry Milner and Karen Bird have also observed the correlation between proportional electoral systems and parliamentary diversity in other countries. Similarly, Pippa Norris has noted the profound effect of what she calls 'consociational systems' or, systems that function on the basis of cooperation and compromise instead of competition, arguing that such types of electoral system promote stability, particularly in instances where diverse groups of people share territory within a single state. According to Norris, "electoral systems represent, perhaps, the most powerful instrument available for institutional engineering, with far-reaching consequences for party systems, the composition of legislatures, and the durability of democratic arrangements" (187). Part of the reason for this is that in proportional systems that involve multiple-member districts, voters are afforded more than one representative, and are therefore able to conceive of their vote as contributing to a particular grouping of possible representatives, rather than a single individual candidate. This can have a profound influence on the strategic decisions that political parties make with respect to nominating candidates.

Proportional electoral systems can positively impact both the quality and quantity of racial minority representation in Canada's parliament. Proportional electoral systems have the potential to shake up static political party systems and pave the way for new political parties with non-traditional priorities to emerge; they both lower the electoral threshold at the local level for individual candidates to get elected, as well as broaden the geographic base from which candidates can draw votes, allowing for new and previously impossible electoral coalitions to be born; and multiple-member electoral districts pose a challenge to gendered and racialized biases that inform voters' ideas about what a leader should look and sound like, inviting voters to consider questions of balance and overall representativeness in addition to individual leadership qualities. Based on these ideas, proportional representation should be seen as a positive step toward broadening the tent of inclusion in the electoral process.

If the 2015 Canadian election is indeed destined for the history books as the last to have been conducted using the First-Past-the-Post electoral system, as promised by Prime Minister Trudeau, then there are a number of important considerations for Canadian parliamentarians to ponder as they chart the course from today to the brave new world of 2019. One often

overlooked consideration is that the government must decide to what extent it wishes to use electoral reform as a springboard for further discussions around how to broaden the scope and inclusivity of democratic participation in Canada, particularly with respect to racialized groups.

As a country that has invested so much of its national identity in the notion of multiculturalism and its concomitant discourses of diversity, inclusion and tolerance, Canada absolutely ought to concern itself with the issue of racialized minority representation in politics, arguably to a much greater extent than it currently does. Just as it is necessary for the government to apply a gender-based analysis to all areas of public policymaking, so too must it systematically apply an anti-racist lens to all of its decision-making, and this includes decisions with respect to reforming Canada's electoral system. Such an approach would result in government actively addressing systemic barriers to entering the political process for racialized minority groups, and the evidence suggests that moving to a proportional electoral system might be a good place to start. Electoral reform, and democratic reform more broadly, must be understood as part of a larger suite of tools at the government's disposal to improve outcomes for traditionally socially excluded groups, including racialized minorities. These range from reforms to the courts and criminal justice system, to improved access in the health and education sectors, to labour market reform, to strengthening the social safety net and access to settlement services and training programs, to name but a few areas in need of attention. Nonetheless, democratic reform has an important role to play in opening the door to these larger discussions, and in strengthening the voices of those underrepresented groups at the decision-making table.

Electoral reform has both intrinsic and instrumental value. On the face of it, there is a pressing need to correct the distortions of First-Past-the-Post, and evidence suggests that a more proportional system will do so while also improving representation of socially excluded groups in society. This alone should be reason enough to proceed with reforms. But ultimately, the real value of such an exercise lies in its ability to spark broader, deeper and more meaningful conversations about how we envision ourselves as a democratic society. If we are truly sincere when we say that "a Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian," as Prime Minister Trudeau famously did on a debate stage in 2015, then we must seize the opportunity that electoral reform provides to bring the lived reality of socially excluded groups closer to that promised ideal of an equal democratic citizenship for all. In such a context, changing the voting system is but a modest first step.

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