

Brief to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

As an ordinary Canadian citizen without any specific experience in politics, or the law, I have spent time to become informed on the various issues related to the electoral reform initiative currently the subject of the ERRE committee. As a result of this work, I have come to a number of conclusions which now form my own opinions on the subject and form the content of the following brief to the committee.

Importance:

During all of my adult life in Canada (I'm 61), I have only rarely experienced federal democracy due to the fact that my vote rarely counts. It does not count since it is not reflected in any proportionate way in the makeup of Parliament due to the fact that because my preference is not aligned with those of the riding's winning candidate. The long-term misalignment between party popular support and the makeup of Parliament, the prevalence of strategic voting, and other undesirable practices indicates my experience is more the norm than the exception.

Further, I am outraged by the fact that under our current system, a party with less than 50% of the popular vote can form a majority. Experience has shown that combined with a low voter turnout, a party with the explicit approval of only 26% of eligible voters can rule with a majority, making serious long-term changes to the country with impunity, while the opposition howls impotently from the sidelines; so much for democracy under our current system.

The resulting lack of democracy in this country makes electoral reform THE most important issue facing a country in which democracy is a most cherished tradition, and in which politicians will be facing increasingly complex and far-reaching decisions that more than ever need strong democratic support.

Preferred Voting Method:

I believe that Mixed Member Proportional Representation (MMPR) is the best alternative to replace our current outdated "horse-and-buggy" era electoral system.

This approach continues the positive precedent of local elected representation while at the same time overcoming the problem of wasted votes. It also avoids complex multi-pass voting systems that most people will not understand, proportionately represents voter's first choice, and avoids Parliament-clogging multi-member ridings required by 'pure' proportional representation. Since MMPR is most like our existing system, the transition to MMPR would be the most natural for the country as a whole.

I am very much against ranked ballot systems where the voter indicates a ranked preference. I am not interested in my second choice being represented in Parliament, and definitely not my third choice. I want my first choice represented, however small a representation that is in relation to other people's preferences, and only MMPR can make this happen while retaining the best of the current system.

Open vs Closed Party Lists:

My preference is guardedly for a Closed List with respect to Party List Members assigned to Parliament to top up a parties proportional representation under MMP. I say “guardedly” because I believe it is in the long-term interests of political parties to actively attract and list the best candidates they can. On the other hand, short-term interests may tempt party brass to use the unelected lists as a forum for party hacks, people with favours due, and a retirement perk, in much the way the Canadian Senate has become, in the eyes of some, a political dumping ground.

I would prefer not to have to elect both the local representatives and members from the party list, and so would prefer a closed list with an independent review of the success or failure of the “closed” approach after 5 years. In this way, evidence of party abuse of the closed list could result in a move to an Open List, requiring list member to be elected as well.

Mandatory vs Optional Voting Requirement:

Governments often assume that citizens that do not vote are tacitly supporting the government and its policies. This is often not the case, but the actual situation is never known since the preferences of non-voters are not tracked. Is it due to indifference, ignorance, lack of choice, none of the above that eligible voters don't vote? This is an important question. I firmly believe that democracy in this country is important enough that every eligible citizen should be required to vote by law, with moderate penalties for non-compliance, and the provision of acceptable reasons for non-compliance, such as documented sickness, mental incapacity, etc.

Such a requirement would not be appropriate without ballots having 2 additional mandatory options. These two options would be “None of the above” and “Any of the above”. These two options, together with the normal candidate choices, give voters the full range of alternatives required to ensure fair mandatory voting. Without these two additional options, mandatory voting simply would force voters to short-circuit the objectives of the electoral process by spoiling ballots, which leaves us exactly where we were with optional voting.

Finally, mandatory voting would emphasize the importance of the vote and encourage eligible voters to get more serious about the exercise of their democratic mandate.

Threshold Voting Age:

Governments are increasingly making decisions that affect generations of Canadians not yet of voting age. Examples include deficit spending now to meet current objectives while generating debt to be paid/serviced by future generations, committing to trade agreements that will affect future generations for many years to come, approving long-term projects such as pipelines that have huge future effects on tomorrow's citizens, approving the extraction of the natural capital of the country without necessary environmental safeguards, leaving future generations with the residue, and so on. Young people today are increasingly sophisticated and connected. It's time this fact was recognized in the electoral system.

At the same time however, new young voters need enhanced education on the voting process prior to becoming eligible to vote, and better sources of non-partisan information on the current issues of the day. In fact we all need better non-partisan information. The CBC could do a better job in this regard, and is an ideal vehicle for this task.

As such, I support lowering the voting age to 16, providing adequate new educational and informational supplements are provided.

Electoral Eligibility:

Age and citizenship should not be the only criterion for electoral eligibility. Inmates in the Correctional System are there because they have abused the rules of society in some way, and so should forego its privileges until such time as they have paid their debt to society. For this reason, I find it incomprehensible that correctional inmates be allowed to vote.

Independent Candidates:

Under MMPR, I see no reason why independent candidates cannot run in regional elections the same way as they do today. If they win, they go to Parliament. Any voter voting Independent would not vote for list candidates if Open List procedures were in place.

Electoral Reform Approval:

There is much discussion about how the reforms recommended by the ERRE should be ratified. I don't believe a referendum or other form of public plebiscite is required or desirable. Many voters will not take the effort to inform themselves of the issues and details, and will vote 'no' to reform out of risk-adverse laziness. We saw this in Ontario some years back when electoral reform came up as an issue to be voted on during a general election. It was turned down by a generally uninformed and uninterested electorate. I don't want this latest opportunity to be squandered by the lowest common denominator.

I also don't believe a reform committee based on the current parliamentary party makeup is appropriate, since it was our broken and obsolete electoral process that formed the current party mix in Parliament.

A reform committee composed of a broad cross-section of all major parties, with no one party dominating, that also includes a broad cross-section of the public and political science academics would be ideal.

Finally, I don't believe it would be appropriate for Parliament to take the recommendations of a non-partisan reform committee and modify those recommendations, cherry-pick the recommendations by accept some recommendations and not others. Parliament should vote on the committee's recommendations as delivered.

Electoral Reform Performance:

We have had to wait far too long for electoral reform, and as a result many years of enhanced democracy have been lost to Canadians. As part of this current reform process, we need to institute a formal ongoing review process of electoral efficiency and performance. The evolution of our democracy should not be an exceptional happening, but instead an ongoing exercise in continuous improvement. Modern life is proceeding at an ever increasing pace and we cannot afford to go back to sleep for another hundred years before we next revisit electoral reform.

I believe current reforms should be reviewed after the next general federal election by the ERRE, and subsequently every 10 years.

I'd like the same process for Parliamentary reform as well. This is another area of our democracy that has been suffering for many years from temporal constipation.