

# Brief to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform.

## Tuesday October 4, 2016

Re Reform of Voting Methods in Federal Elections by the Liberal Government.

Discussion:

The question is, should the Liberal party of Canada, now that it is the government, follow through on its platform promise to reform the electoral system. This is the platform:

*“We are committed to ensuring that 2015 will be the last federal election conducted under the first-past-the-post voting system.*

*We will convene an all-party Parliamentary committee to review a wide variety of reforms, such as ranked ballots, proportional representation, mandatory voting, and online voting.*

*This committee will deliver its recommendations to Parliament. Within 18 months of forming government, we will introduce legislation to enact electoral reform.”*

1: It seems to me that a subject so elemental to our basic right of democracy, that is, a free, private and fair vote to elect any member of Parliament, therefore, before any change is so enacted to the present system, then such change must be, in all fairness, be referred to the people of Canada for their opinion in an referendum. I see that the minister responsible makes no such commitment and neither is one expressed in the above Platform. In this, their feet must be held to the fire.

2: Canada is a large, complex and diversified country. The use of alternative methods of elections discussed have involved countries that are small and compact with largely homogeneous populations. While not perfect, the plurality system with its simple, easily understood method may be better suited to such a diverse country. It is noted that large countries such as Russia and, in particular, India all need up to several rounds of voting before a winner is called. Run offs also occur in smaller countries as well. The “First past the post” system eliminates this.

3: “Unfairness”. One of the objection against the plurality system is that it is “unfair” and that the largest parties get seats out of proportion to the number of votes received as a party. Therefore smaller parties are disadvantaged and find it difficult to win any seats at all. See the appendix for the results in the last general election.

However this is not necessarily the case. For example, in the 38<sup>th</sup> general election, the Bloc Quebecois won 17% of the seats while winning 10% of the vote. There are other examples; in Scotland for instance where Scottish National Party gained 56 seats, all in Scotland, with a

4.7% share of the vote while the UK independence Party, with 12.6% of the national vote, gained only a single seat.

Most proportional representation systems utilize a threshold system between 2 - 5%. This means that if Canada's threshold was 5%, then, neither the Bloc nor the Greens would have been able to win any seats in the 41<sup>st</sup> election.

Fairness is relative, it seems and no single or combination of systems will do away with it. There will always be a group claiming that the system is discriminating against them.

4: A potential problem is that extreme parties can gain a foothold, gain acceptance and become recognized as a "mainstream" party. This is sometimes cited as a cause for the collapse of the Weimar government. An extreme example yes, but a real one. Small parties may also act as king makers especially as a proportional system may fracture larger parties as the election of candidates from smaller parties becomes possible and they become more attractive thereby.

5: This leads to coalitions. Many believe that this will be a good thing. They can be when the coalitions are between parties of similar interests and with leaders of good faith. This is not always the case, particularly in politics. As well, for many compromise is not possible and neither can many policies be easily positioned on the left-center-right position.

Furthermore, a coalition may not necessarily form at the center. And small parties may have excessive influence, supplying a coalition with a majority only if a certain policy, not necessarily favored by the majority of voters is adopted.

More important, the ability of voters to vote out of office a party in disfavor is curtailed.

6: In a first past the post system, some feel that their votes are wasted. The real situation is; your candidate did not get elected. Changing the system will not change this.

7: Gerrymandering, unfortunately, is a consistent problem. No matter what system is used, this will happen. It may become more difficult, but it is not impossible.

8: In setting the districts most proportional representation systems set an upper limit of 100,000 electors per MP with five MP's elected per constituency. In point #2 it was noted that Canada is a large country. This means that northern districts, if these rules were followed, would be large and unwieldy with the further result that candidates would be difficult to get to know. In this regard it is important to note that the territories currently have one member each, while PEI has four. Two very different areas one of which could be suited to a proportional representation system, and the other which, assuredly, is not.

9: In the plurality system, there is a direct link between the elected MP and the public, even if they did not vote for him. A proportional representation system, on the other hand makes these ties distant and tenuous. This would be even more exaggerated in northern areas and areas outside the main cities of Canada.

In summary, the proposed change to our electoral system should not be pursued without a referendum of the whole country. To do anything else, is in the writer's opinion, a disservice to the country and a rejection of the democracy that our country is built on.

Thank you.

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