

**Brief for the Special Committee on Electoral Reform
Submitted by Ashley Okurley**

As we consider electoral reform, let us not forget that many thousands of Canadian citizens would have liked to vote in the last three federal elections, but were denied a ballot on the arbitrary basis of geographic, and time-weighted criteria (ie: the 5-year rule that strips voting rights from Canadian citizens all over the world). Canadian citizens were once denied ballots on the basis of gender, ethnicity and lack of financial wherewithal. But a civilized democracy must mean that a citizen gets a vote. Period. No matter their gender, ethnicity, financial circumstances.....or where they go to sleep most nights of the year.

There is currently a case before the Supreme Court that is set to be heard in February 2017 that will hopefully re-instate the right to vote for Canadians living outside Canadian borders. In the deliberations on electoral reform, there are two key aspects that I hope are considered in addition to the various voting systems under consideration.

- 1) **I ask that 6-10 seats in the House of Commons get apportioned to represent Canadian citizens living outside Canadian borders.** Other countries (ex: France) allow a voice for their most global citizens in their system of Government. Canada should as well.
- 2) **We should lower the voting age to 16 years old.** Thanks to their comfort with technology and media, young people are exposed to a more information than ever before and perfectly capable of expressing themselves at the ballot box by age 16. Engaging high-school aged children would hopefully set a pattern of increased future civic engagement among those coming of age and require the politics of our country to focus more on the issues most important to youth as 16 and 17 year-olds would have to be engaged by those seeking their votes.

I alluded to the disenfranchisement of Canadian citizens because of where they live. A great Canadian artist, Joni Mitchell, once wrote “you don’t know what you got till it’s gone” – I certainly felt that in 2008 when I was first denied a ballot in that year’s federal election. Voting is a pride-filled, civic experience that I cherish. I’ve never missed a vote starting with my first vote just after my 18th birthday and I was even on the ballot during the federal election in 2000 – in short, voting is important to me! Being denied a ballot because I have lived outside of Canada for more than five years was a deeply traumatic experience that really brought home how devastating it can be when such a precious aspect of being Canadian is denied because of where one lives/works.

I went to work for Manulife’s US division several years ago before the Stephen Harper government began enforcing a much more restrictive interpretation of a 1993 law that stripped the right to vote of Canadian citizens after five years based on geographic criteria. Yet there are government workers at the Canadian consulate a few blocks from my office in Miami that continue to be allowed to vote after 5 years (because they work for the government!), but because I work for a private Canadian company outside of Canada, I am no longer allowed to vote in Canadian elections, federal or provincial.

This is an asinine law that diminishes Canada and Canadian democracy. US citizens can still vote, no matter where they live or how long they've lived there. Indeed, if a child is born overseas to a US-citizen parent and that parent goes to the local consulate to ensure that their child obtains US citizenship, then upon turning voting age that child, who may never have even set foot in the United States, is eligible to vote! The same is true for France and many other civilized democracies.

In Canada, it is possible for a citizen to be incarcerated for more than five years, but so long as that citizen is incarcerated on Canadian soil, she or he will remain an eligible voter! So I ask you, how is Canadian democracy served by denying Canadians their right to vote simply because they live outside the country for more than a few years? Ex-patriate Canadians cultivate the Canadian diaspora in the world, begin relationships that lead to trading and other business opportunities for Canadian businesses, still pay taxes and return to the country on many occasions, carry the Canadian flag on July 1st AND Thanksgiving in October, amid countless other daily examples of promulgating Canadian values and Canadian culture with people around the world. If you agree that democracy is only as healthy as the degree to which people are able to participate in it, than please allow your fellow citizens living abroad to have the same voting rights as every other Canadian citizen.

Respectfully Submitted,

Ashley O'Kurley