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Special Committee on Electoral Reform  
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street  
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Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

### **Submission to Special Committee on Electoral Reform**

#### **Summary**

My graduate research was on the use of the alternative vote in British Columbia, as well as other voting systems across Canada, and my submission outlines the historical context in which voting systems have been debated and used in Canada. The committee has an opportunity to make recommendations that are based on more than the seat-maximizing ambitions favoured by many politicians both past and present. It can do so by recommending a system of proportional representation.

I make the following recommendations to the committee and the government:

1. Adopt a system of proportional representation to fulfill the committee's mandate to make recommendations that will improve effectiveness and legitimacy, engagement, integrity, and local representation.
2. Choose a system of proportional representation that incorporates multi-member ridings and ranked ballots to uphold the requirement for local representation.
3. Categorically reject a majoritarian system.
4. Embrace a proportional representation system using a ranked ballot component. Canadians have used such systems in the past (and present) and can easily do so on a larger scale.
5. Fully fund a lengthy public advertising campaign prior to the first election under a new system.
6. Reflect on where the committee has failed its mandate for inclusion, particularly in the areas of accessibility for individuals with disabilities and low-income and homeless Canadians. Consider how these individuals and their needs will be involved in crafting new legislation.
7. Provide adequate training for election day officials and appropriate staffing levels to smooth the transition to a new voting system.
8. Protect independent candidates on equal footing. This may require a "nearest winner" top-up for an independent candidate category if MMP or a similar system is chosen.

## Relevant Research

My graduate research was on the history of electoral reform in British Columbia, with a particular focus on the adoption and use of the alternative vote (AV) in B.C.'s 1952 and 1953 elections, as well as the system's abolition. In the course of this work I also wrote about the use of non-first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting systems across Canada.

Historically, Canadian politicians have changed the voting system for political expediency. I was moved to make a submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform in the hopes that the committee members will not repeat the mistakes of their predecessors.

## Historical Context

Major discussions of electoral reform in Canadian politics, as well as actual change, have taken place primarily for politically selfish reasons, as in the following examples:

- B.C. municipalities such as Victoria and Vancouver adopted the single transferable vote (STV) in the early twentieth century to keep labour from sweeping FPTP elections.<sup>1</sup>
- When the United Farmers of Alberta formed a majority government in 1921, they abandoned their promise to implement proportional representation (PR) across the province. They introduced STV only in the urban centres, where they stood to gain seats under PR.<sup>2</sup>
- In the aftermath of the Winnipeg General Strike, the Manitoba Liberal government introduced STV in Winnipeg to avoid an FPTP rout in the city at the hands of labour.<sup>3</sup>
- A United Farmers of Manitoba majority government introduced AV in rural ridings in 1924, with the support of the opposition Liberals. The Conservatives accused the government of trying to hurt their chances in future elections.<sup>4</sup>
- In the 1940s, the B.C. Liberal party supported a compulsory Borda count ranked ballot that would award, for example, three points to a voter's first choice in a three-way race, two points to their second choice, and one point to their third choice.<sup>5</sup> The Liberals fancied themselves voters' likely second choice, and a Borda count favoured them even more than AV.

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Pilon, "Explaining Voting System Reform in Canada, 1874 to 1960," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 40.3 (Fall 2006): 135-61.

<sup>2</sup> H.C.J. Phillips, "Challenges to the Voting System in Canada, 1874 – 1974" (Ph.D. diss., University of Western Ontario, 1976), 226.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 142; Pilon, "Explaining Voting System Reform in Canada," 145.

<sup>4</sup> Harold J. Jansen, "The Single Transferable Vote in Alberta and Manitoba" (Ph.D. diss., University of Alberta, 1998), 45-6.

<sup>5</sup> University of British Columbia Special Collections, British Columbia Liberal Party fonds, box 1, file 3, "B.C. Liberal Association Convention Proceedings," 9-10 December 1947, 47; 49.

- The B.C. Liberals and Conservatives legislated AV prior to the 1952 election to help elect their candidates and to act “as an effective roadblock to socialism.”<sup>6</sup>
- When B.C.’s Social Credit party was elected with a majority government in 1953, it abolished AV as it no longer needed it to obtain a majority.<sup>7</sup>
- Tom Flanagan proposed the alternative vote as a means to unite the Progressive Conservative and Reform vote in the 1990s and avoid a split on the right.<sup>8</sup>
- Neither the governing B.C. Liberals nor the opposition NDP stood to gain from STV in the 2005 and 2009 referenda, and neither party publicly supported the system.<sup>9</sup>

### **Observations**

The committee has an opportunity to make recommendations that are based on more than the seat-maximizing ambitions favoured by many politicians both past and present. It can do so by recommending a system of proportional representation.

Anything less than a voting system designed to produce proportional results is a half-measure that will not gain credibility with the electorate. First-past-the-post favours the Liberal and Conservatives in their desire to obtain majority governments, but there is no compelling reason to keep this system in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The committee has heard from witnesses who have done a thorough job debunking the notion that there are more elections or instability under PR than FPTP, for example. It is an outdated system for Canada and should be discarded immediately.

A proportional representation system would mean that parties such as the Greens and NDP would typically secure more seats, although in 2015 both the Conservatives and the Bloc would have benefitted as well. It would also mean that areas such as Vancouver Island would once again elect Conservative and Liberal representatives. And it would keep Atlantic Canada (or any region) from appearing to be politically homogeneous when the popular vote shows it is not. Having diverse political perspectives from across the nation is essential to meaningful debate in Parliament.

If the committee recommends a system of proportional representation – and if Parliament legislates the same – it would turn Canada’s history of electoral reform on its head. Putting better representation and a better democracy above political self-interest would provide demonstrable benefits for political representation and policy

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Harrison, “The Alternative Vote in British Columbia: Values Debates and Party Politics (University of Victoria: 2010); University of Victoria Archives and Special Collections, Byron Johnson Papers, 73-10, box 1, file 5, R. W. Kennedy to Byron Johnson, 28 February 1949.

<sup>7</sup> Harrison, “The Alternative Vote in British Columbia,” 116.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

development. If political parties are willing to engage with the system, it could also set a tone of collaboration for generations to come.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are categorized according to the principles governing the committee's mandate.

#### *Effectiveness and legitimacy:*

1. *Adopt a system of proportional representation.* The committee is required to make a recommendation that will: ensure votes “are fairly translated”; reduce distortion; and “strengthe[n] the link between voter intention and the election of representatives.” As I will show throughout these recommendations, the only way to accomplish this goal is to adopt a system of proportional representation. To the extent possible, all voters' ballots should meaningfully affect the composition of Parliament.
2. *Categorically reject a majoritarian system.* If the committee does not recommend a specific system to the House of Commons, it must be clear that a majoritarian system – e.g., retaining FPTP, or adopting AV – would be inappropriate. If Canada had voted using AV in the 2015 election, for example, it likely would have returned the same results for Atlantic Canada. Forty-eight per cent of voters in New Brunswick cast ballots that were not used to elect any local representative in 2015. The numbers were similar in P.E.I. (42%); Nova Scotia (38%); and Newfoundland and Labrador (36%). The committee cannot fulfill its mandate by endorsing a majoritarian system. Similarly, any system adopted must avoid FPTP in any of its components (e.g., an MMP model should use ranked ballots in its single-member districts).

#### *Engagement:*

3. *Adopt a system of proportional representation.* Part of the committee's stated goal is to “enhance social cohesion.” Proportional representation would elect representatives of all political stripes from across the country, reducing the perception of stark political divisions across the nation. Additionally, a proportional representation system that includes a ranked ballot would require candidates to court second choices and make coalition government the new normal. Both of these factors would “foster greater civility and collaboration.”

4. *Fully fund a months-long public advertising campaign prior to the first election under a new system.* Prior to British Columbia's 1952 election, every household received a pamphlet explaining AV, including how to mark one's ballot and other frequently asked questions. A one-minute film reel was distributed to all commercial theatres, and there were months of print advertising and numerous features in newspapers on how to fill out the new ballots. Nevertheless, a phone poll a week before the election found that many individuals were still not clear on what to do on election day.<sup>10</sup> An effective public advertising campaign is crucial to ensuring voters engage and participate in a new process. Advertising and educational materials must be available in accessible formats and as many languages as possible.

*Accessibility and inclusiveness:*

5. *Reflect on where the committee has failed its mandate for inclusion.* The committee has done a poor job fulfilling its mandate to ensure its consultation agenda focused on "strengthening the inclusion of all Canadians in our diverse society." I previously wrote to the committee to ask if there would be ASL interpreters at the committee's Victoria meeting. I did not receive a response, and at the meeting I saw no interpreters. The Canadian Association for the Deaf estimates there are "357,000 ... culturally and linguistically Deaf" Canadians.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, at the Victoria MP's electoral reform town hall, the committee Vice Chair said the committee would be inviting organizations to speak on behalf of homeless and low-income Canadians. I recognize that the committee is under-resourced, but inviting those organizations does not constitute meaningful consultation with low-income and homeless individuals. Attending a hearing represents a disproportionate cost for those individuals, and meaningful inclusion would have required the committee to reach out in a proactive and appropriate way. Putting those concerns aside, there were no witnesses from any "representative" organizations at the Victoria meeting. Finally, the requirement to present photo identification to attend or speak at a hearing is a barrier that disproportionately affects poor Canadians. Permitting ID-less Canadians to attend if someone vouches for them does not mitigate this barrier.

These failures should not be taken as an excuse to throw out the committee's work and go back to the drawing board. Rather, the legislative

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>11</sup> Canadian Association of the Deaf, "Statistics on Deaf Canadians" (3 July 2015) <<http://cad.ca/issues-positions/statistics-on-deaf-canadians>>.

drafters and policy makers must ensure that all Canadians are able to engage with a new system in a way that meets their needs, and the committee should make recommendations to that effect. It may require additional consultation measures with groups such as low-income and homeless Canadians as the legislative and public education processes move forward. Our elected representatives can and should do a better job of meaningful consultation with groups that are shut out of policy development far too often.

6. *Embrace a proportional representation system using a ranked ballot component.* The committee has heard from witnesses, including representatives from countries using ranked ballot PR systems, who have testified that voters are capable of ranking candidates 1-2-3. They are correct. It is likely that spoiled ballots will increase under any new system for the first election; however, those numbers decrease over time, and they are not a reason to dismiss such a system. If Vancouverites could rank ballots in the 1920s<sup>12</sup> without the benefit of modern advertising campaigns, Canadians in 2019 will also be capable of handling such a change. Canadians currently rank ballots when participating in leadership votes, for example. To the best of my knowledge, those contests have not been met with complaints that the system is too confusing.
7. *Training for election day officials.* Voters in the 1952 elections reported chaos and “disgusting” and disorganized conditions at the polls.<sup>13</sup> There must be effective training for Elections Canada staff to prepare them to answer all questions. Additionally, polling places must be properly staffed (perhaps “over-staffed”) to account for the likelihood of longer lines in a first election under a new system, particularly if voters are being asked to rank candidates for the first time, or to mark more than one vote under MMP. Staff education would also avoid unnecessarily long counting processes under a new system.

*Integrity:*

8. *Adopt a system of proportional representation.* A system where each person’s vote affects the composition of Parliament has greater integrity than a system that does not. The results would be more reliable and verifiable than they are at present, as voters would know that their vote – through transfers or a top-up – had a meaningful effect on the final result.

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<sup>12</sup> Harrison, “The Alternative Vote in British Columbia,” 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

*Local representation:*

9. *Adopt a system of proportional representation.* Many Canadians are currently without a local representative who reflects their political views in Parliament. At the Victoria hearing, one of the committee members said that once she was elected, she became the MP for all her constituents, not just those who voted for her. That may be true of constituency case work – e.g., an MP from Party X would of course help a Party Y constituent navigate the immigration process – but it is not true of policy issues where there is a clear division between political parties. Canadians want their MPs to go to bat for them on their problems with government bureaucracy, but they also deserve local representatives who will represent their political views in Parliament.
  
10. *Consider a proportional system that includes multi-member ridings and a ranked ballot component.* The committee has heard that voters vote for parties, not candidates, despite what people may say and what politicians may wish to believe.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, STV, or the rural-urban hybrid system with a proportional top-up, could be a suitable solution to provide for local representation.
  
11. *Protect independent candidates on equal footing. This may require a “nearest winner” top-up for an independent candidate category if MMP or a similar system is chosen.* STV or a rural-urban hybrid with a proportional top-up should allow independent candidates to compete in a proportional system. However, MMP and rural-urban proportional top-ups, as they are currently understood, would likely not allow independent list top-ups even if independents achieved, for the sake of argument, 5% of the popular vote in a region. I would not favour a “nearest winner” system for list top-ups generally; however, a solution must be found for independents to partake in list top-ups in cases where the electorate is supporting independent candidates. A nearest winner top-up for independents, if independents surpassed the popular vote threshold, may be a solution. It would provide unique regional voices and local representation for the ridings in which they ran. This could be achieved by allowing voters to choose “independent” with their second vote. Parties may be loath to give power to diverse voices, but a new electoral system is an opportunity to create a more inclusive democracy. A more inclusive solution than the one I have proposed may be

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<sup>14</sup> See for example: Dennis Pilon, *The Politics of Voting: Reforming Canada’s Electoral System* (Toronto: Emond Montgomery, 2007), 127; J. Terence Morley et al., *The Reins of Power: Governing British Columbia* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1983), 14.

required, as it would not scale well to regions that elect few top-up MPs.

**Conclusion**

I would like to thank any committee and political staff or MPs who have read this submission. I appreciate the work that you do.

Reading about the history of electoral reform in Canada would give anyone good reason to be cynical about the motives of politicians and political parties. In the course of my research I have reflected on the lives of many who fought for reform, only to see the ideas they believed in dismissed on a political whim. In my own life I can think of one individual, Wendy Bergerud, who spent over a decade fighting for PR before she passed away this year. Like myself, she truly believed that proportional representation could lead to better politics, better representation, and better policy.

I am 29 years old, and I would like to see proportional representation in my lifetime. History tells me I won't. Please prove me wrong.

Sincerely,

Stephen Harrison

cc: Murray Rankin, MP, Victoria  
Rachel Blaney, MP, North Island-Powell River  
Randall Garrison, MP, Esquimalt-Saanich-Sooke  
Gord Johns, MP, Courtenay-Alberni  
Alistair MacGregor, MP, Cowichan-Malahat-Langford  
Sheila Malcolmson, MP, Nanaimo-Ladysmith  
Elizabeth May, MP, Saanich-Gulf Islands