

VIA EMAIL

October 5, 2016

To the Special Committee on Electoral Reform:

My name is Valerie Sing Turner, and I first want to thank the Special Committee on Electoral Reform for holding a session in my home riding, Vancouver Centre, on September 28, 2016. I was able to attend most (but not all) of the panel presentations and open mic sessions in both the afternoon and evening, and was one of the fortunate few who managed to nab a spot during the evening open mic before being cut off by the chair. However, two minutes is not nearly enough time to address my concerns, so I am submitting my full thoughts in this emailed brief.

I am not a democracy geek; I am a professional theatre artist who believes deeply in social justice. And speaking from a social justice perspective, I have three points to make:

1. **To increase civic engagement and voter turn-out**, I support lowering the voting age to 16. I realize this is controversial. However, when I was 16 – which I must confess was well before the internet age – a federal election was upcoming. Despite the fact that we could not vote, my social studies teacher had us bring in any newspaper articles that discussed party platforms, which we would analyze and compare with the platforms of other parties, and discuss the impact of those policies on ourselves, our families, and our community. We studied our local candidates, and given what we had learned from our research, we individually decided which candidate we would vote for in our in-class mini-election.

Because my social studies teacher had given me the gift of **electoral literacy**, from the moment I turned 18, no matter whether I lived in Victoria, Toronto, or Vancouver, and no matter whether it was a municipal, provincial or federal election, *I have voted in every single election in which I was eligible to vote*. I believe that if high school curricula were to include such exercises in critical thinking and electoral literacy, in conjunction with a lowered voting age of 16, we could create a young and highly engaged citizenry that crosses socio-economic barriers, geographic divides, and racial and gender biases.

2. As some of you may be aware, on September 24, 2016, an Ottawa police officer posted the following online comment in response to the *Ottawa Citizen* newspaper's report on the tragic death of acclaimed Inuk artist, Annie Pootoogook: *"Because much of the Aboriginal population in Canada is just satisfied being alcohol or drug abusers, living in poor conditions, etc., they have to have the will to change; it's not society's fault."*¹

The problem is not so much that this police officer is a bigot; the problem is that he is not alone in thinking this way. Canada has a well-documented history of disenfranchising women and racialized minorities, and institutionalized systemic racism and sexism continues to *effectively* disenfranchise women and racialized communities today. First-past-the-post and other winner-take-all models reinforce systemic racism and sexism; therefore, **I am 100% in support of some form of proportional representation**. As a woman and a member of a racialized minority, I understand all too well the paramount importance of *meaningful* (as opposed to tokenistic) representation of women, Aboriginal peoples, and people of colour at the tables of power. Proportional representation will enable a greater

¹ <http://aptn.ca/news/2016/09/27/ottawa-police-confirm-officer-posted-racist-comments-about-annie-pootoogooks-death/>

plurality of voices in Parliament; effective representation of constituents who have been historically erased or silenced; and creating a legislative environment in which all political parties will be motivated to work *together* for the betterment of this country and its citizens, rather than working in opposition for political points and partisan party politics.

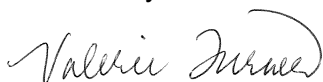
3. **I am adamantly opposed to holding a referendum on electoral reform.** Proponents of a referendum are operating under a misconception that because we all have a vote, we all have an equal say. But it is only a person with privilege and/or an ignorance of history who has the luxury to believe such nonsense.

During the evening open mic session of the September 28th ERRE session, I was astounded (and angry) at the number of people who kept insisting that the current system has "served Canada well for 150 years"; it was also extremely disappointing to witness young people who had obviously been coached to parrot that ridiculous notion. They either didn't know or chose to ignore the fact that out of those 150 years, white women² have only been eligible to vote federally for 97 of those years; that since being denied the vote in 1874, Chinese Canadians have only been eligible to vote for 69 years; that since being denied the vote in 1895, Japanese Canadians have only been eligible to vote for 67 years; and even more shamefully, **Indigenous peoples have only been able to vote for 56 years without forfeiting their Indian status – which means that there are many alive today who remember being disenfranchised.** Every marginalized community has had to work hard to be recognized as full citizens, to overcome a sexist and racist electoral system that, by its very nature, was *designed* to exclude people of differing perspectives.

Therefore, it is *immoral* for a privileged majority to decide on the rights of a minority. As the woman bus driver at the afternoon open mic session so eloquently noted, if a referendum was put forward during those moments of historic decision-making of whether to extend the franchise beyond white men, it is likely that women, Aboriginal peoples, and people of colour would *still* not be allowed to vote. If we had had a referendum in 2005, it is unlikely that LGBTQ persons would have the right to marry as they do today. **And I would add that given the disgusting animosity, ignorance, and racism that continues to be directed against Aboriginal peoples in Canada today, it is highly doubtful that a referendum on the question of whether to allow Aboriginal peoples to vote would pass in 2016.**³

The average Canadian does not have the time or resources to inform themselves fully to vote on electoral reform. You, on the other hand, are being paid to spend *months* educating yourselves. You are our elected MPs. It is YOUR job to consult Canadians. It is YOUR job to gather and consider the best scientific and sociological evidence from the experts. It is YOUR job to make tough decisions in the best interests of ALL the people of Canada, not in the interests of your respective parties nor yourself. Replace First-Past-the-Post with a system of proportional representation. Do your job.

Yours sincerely,



Valerie Sing Turner

² The 1917 Military Voters Act allowed nurses and women in the armed services to vote; the Wartime Election Act extended the vote to women with husbands, sons or fathers serving overseas; and as of January 1, 1919, all white women over 21 were allowed to vote federally. <http://www.canadahistoryproject.ca/1914/1914-08-women-vote.html>

³ CBC-Angus Reid poll October 3, 2016: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/poll-canadians-multiculturalism-immigrants-1.3784194> and <http://theyee.ca/News/2016/10/05/White-People-Confronting-Racism/>