

Members of the ERRE Committee:

Three months ago I did not have a strong view about electoral reform in Canada. But I did have a desire to fully understand the main electoral system options, and to reach a conclusion about whether any of them could actually address the distortions and extremes our present system has often generated in the House of Commons over the past century. Since June, I have watched or listened to all the Ottawa-based ERRE committee proceedings: the expert witness presentations, the ERRE Committee members' questions and comments, and the dialogue in the sessions, in the media, and on Twitter. I have also read many of the 112 briefs submitted by presenters and others, and I attended the ERRE committee meeting in my city. Predictably, I fit the IPSOS poll profile of those most likely to be taking an interest in electoral reform over the summer—an older, educated, financially secure male.¹ I have never been a member of, or worked for, a political party.

I found the proceedings quite interesting most of the time. For the most part, Committee members engaged thoughtfully with the experts, seeking their views on the options and exploring implications. It was clear that a number of Members were grasping all the details and implications of the testimony, and were able to bring these ideas into subsequent discussions. I thought some Members used too much of their time for repeating their own views or for “thinking aloud” at times. Sometimes substitute members struggled with how to effectively contribute. Conservative and Bloc representatives put considerable effort into trying to extract pro-referendum concessions from witnesses and this was not always a good use of the Committee's, witnesses' and viewers' time. Some of the witnesses were exceptionally knowledgeable, and all provided useful perspectives and information. The ERRE Committee Members took on a significant obligation in time, focused energy, and preparation, and they deserve credit for their efforts. Overall it has been a very informative process—for Committee members certainly, and for those of us who were able to follow online.

Opinions and Conclusions:

- 1) **Proportional representation (PR).** It seems very clear from the wide array of evidence presented from people who have studied, or have direct experience with alternate electoral systems, that proportional representation in its various forms is “electoral best practice”. If modified to fit Canadian realities, a version of PR could be implemented that would address each of the ERRE principles to at least some extent. The fact that many of the PR options have been put in place elsewhere helps makes it possible to develop a “made in Canada” option with some confidence in its predicted impact. The Committee should be able to arrive at a common conclusion about a suitable version of proportional representation, with appropriate exceptions and variations. Some experts and many commentators have suggested that our current system is “not that badly broken”, and therefore does not need fixing. I disagree. Our system is defective enough to have fostered and maintained some very undesirable patterns and outcomes (e.g. extreme policy, program and priority shifts over time, often reversed by incoming governments; chronically polarized partisan positions; an “attack and immobilize orientation” in campaigns and public political

¹ Darrell Bricker, CEO, IPSOS Public Affairs – August 31, 2016 ERRE Testimony

discourse, *false majorities*² as a common occurrence; and the belief of many Canadians that most of the time, their vote makes no real difference).

- 2) **Vested interest and timing.** I think there is an urgency to move this agenda forward and to introduce new system before the next election. Many witnesses and Committee members have suggested it is more important to “do electoral reform right, than to do it quickly”. I am worried that not doing it relatively quickly will be tantamount to not doing it at all. I say this because behind the Conservative position on a referendum requirement there is a not very subtle view that the Party’s future interests are best served by the current plurality system. Similarly, for the Liberal Party, introduction of a proportional system is not in the immediate interests of the Party either. If the Liberal party’s chances of a second majority in 2019 are as good, as some suggest, a change to a proportional system would almost certainly remove this possibility. Had the Liberal Party anticipated that a majority outcome was probable when the platform was being developed, it is hard to imagine that the “last first-past-the-post election” campaign promise would have been included in the platform. But fortunately a commitment to electoral reform was made and I think the opportunity for change should be seized. If the attempt to get consensus on a new approach becomes impossible, and the current government abandons the effort, or opts for extending the process and delaying the decision, there is considerable risk that electoral reform will be postponed indefinitely—as has been the case in several provinces. The two major parties would then continue to compete for the next false majority, and democratic improvements would be delayed for the foreseeable future. This would be a most unfortunate outcome for Canadians and the political system that serves us.
- 3) **A better electoral reform process.** If the commitment to reform were not so fragile, (if there was currently a genuine multi-party commitment to pursue it) it would be preferable to have the electoral reform process led by a “Citizens’ Assembly” as has been done in several provinces. These processes seem to allow for a true non-partisan process to be carried out. Other citizens, who could never have taken the time to understand all the options and implications and determine a preference, can place confidence in the work the assembly has done and support the recommendation. In BC it seems clear that major party ambivalence, too little information sharing, and the use of a referendum, with a 60% requirement for passage derailed one of the best chances for carefully considered electoral reform in the country. If it turns out that there is not enough agreement on the ERRE Committee to form a credible, clear recommendation, and if the government then chooses not to proceed with legislation in time for 2019 implementation, I would hope there will at least be a shared commitment to start a broader, non-partisan process immediately, which can build an informed consensus on Canadian electoral reform—and that there will be genuine multi-party agreement from the beginning that the process is legitimate. However, at this point, it is hard to imagine where the necessary momentum and support could come from to accomplish this. (See point 2)
- 4) **Referendum on electoral reform.** I was disappointed by suggestion made by some ERRE Committee members, and many others in other venues, that anyone opposed to a referendum on electoral reform must surely believe that Canadians are incapable of

² Definition: A majority of seats in the Parliament or Legislature based on achieving less than half of the popular vote.

understanding issues and make good choices (i.e. they are ignorant or dumb). For example, Ms. Ambrose, both on Twitter and her IPolitics article³, centered out one particular ERRE witness and attempted to discredit his expertise by reporting that he had suggested Canadians were ignorant. No doubt this helps to gather support for a referendum, but it is a very simplistic view. Many circumstances in the modern world are complex enough that nobody—no matter how intelligent they are—can fully understand them quickly, without taking significant time to develop relevant knowledge and expertise. For example, most of us rely on the expertise of our mechanics, but would never suggest that Canadians are too ignorant or too dumb to understand mechanics. We just accept that many of us cannot realistically take the time to develop mechanical skills and knowledge, and so we choose to rely on those with adequate training and experience to act on our behalf. It has taken the Members of Parliament on the Committee and those of us following the proceedings many hours of focused attention to get a basic understanding of the electoral reform options and their implications. It is not practical for all Canadians to do this. As citizens we should respect the efforts of groups of people who take the time to think through the electoral reform options, and put confidence in their conclusions—especially if they are the product of respectful discussion and compromise. I think most Canadians would accept this process if the Committee is successful and the Members' parties support a consensus view. Failing this result, a national electoral reform “Citizens Assembly” should be formed to serve the same purpose, over a longer period. A referendum is not the democratic gold standard for a complex issue like this in a complex country like Canada.

- 5) **ERRE Committee Consensus.** Given the above dynamics and circumstances, I strongly encourage the members of the committee to strive to reach a consensus recommendation by December. This should be possible, but is dependent on your commitment as Committee Members to achieving it, and on whether your parties choose to accept your advice, or to influence your actions as Committee members. As noted above, short term, partisan interests conflict with achieving consensus for change, but please try to rise above this constraint in the remaining two months. Whatever next steps the current government takes on electoral reform, it is important for Canadians to know what 12 thoughtful politicians from all parties, who spent six months (and for many of you much longer) thinking through the electoral options, were able to agree is the best option for Canada. As our elected representatives, please try to accomplish this.

Thank you for your work on the ERRE committee. I very much hope it results in a major change to our electoral system. If it does, this work may be the most important work you have ever done as representatives of your constituents, and your country.

Dave Hedlund
Regina

³ *No Electoral Reform Without A Referendum ... Period.* Rona Ambrose. Available at: <http://ipolitics.ca/2016/09/26/no-electoral-reform-without-a-referendum-period/>