

BRIEF TO ELECTORAL REFORM COMMITTEE

by Terry Dance-Bennink, M. Ed.

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I'm honoured to present this brief to the ERRE Committee as an ordinary citizen, a woman, an environmentalist and a voter who cares deeply about democracy and civil discourse.

I'll begin by sharing my own personal reasons for championing electoral reform. I'll conclude by commenting on the five values underlining the Committee's work, my preferred voting system, and the best way to ensure legitimacy and public acceptance.

My brief is the basis of a speech I delivered at **three town halls** on electoral reform sponsored by local MPs Rankin, Garrison, and MacGregor on Vancouver Island, where 90% of participants indicated support for proportional representation. I'm also a volunteer with the Victoria chapter of Fair Vote Canada.

A more personal story....

I grew up in the 60s in Ontario and was actively involved in the movements for peace, women's rights, and racial equality, as a student at the University of Toronto.

Eventually, though, I had to earn a living! I spent most of my working life in the public sector as an adult educator. I ended my career as vice-president academic of Fleming College in Peterborough, Ontario, and as such, could not engage in official political activity.

In fact, after my 60s activism, I became rather cynical about politics. But since I retired to BC with my husband ten years ago, I've become re-engaged politically. I vote for the best, most qualified candidate, not always the same party.

I voted strategically in the last federal election to ensure the incumbent government was not re-elected. But I dislike this pressure to vote strategically, as do many of my peers.

I was shocked to learn that nine million voters in Canada's last federal election elected no one to represent their views in Parliament. This only increases voter cynicism and disengagement. But I was happy that 63% of voters chose parties that campaigned to make every vote count in 2019).

A passion for electoral reform

So why do I wake up at night worrying about electoral reform? Here are three reasons.

Climate change is my biggest worry. Fossil fuel expansion and a 1.5 degree rise in global warming just don't mix. They're like oil and water. The OECD regularly rates Canada at the bottom of the barrel when it comes to climate performance.

And I'm fed up playing jack-in-the-box. First Enbridge pops up and we slam the lid (we hope.) Then Kinder Morgan pops up and B.C.'s mayors slam the lid, along with two-thirds of BC's citizens in repeated public opinion polls. But who's listening?

Then LNG proposals start mushrooming in BC, one right in our very own backyard, namely the Saanich Inlet, and we mobilize yet again to slam the lid.

The Site C dam pops up at the same time. If it proceeds, it would cost taxpayers \$9+ billion for energy that is not needed, flood farmland that could feed a million people, and infringe, once again, on First Nations rights. I'm getting dizzy and tired of this merry-go-round of challenges to our precious planet.

How do we stop more floods, droughts, and fracking-induced earthquakes? It certainly isn't with a majoritarian, first-past-the-post voting system.

I endured ten years of a climate-denying federal government that won with 39% of the popular vote in 2011 and yet had 100% of the power in Parliament. We have a similar situation today with the Liberal government winning 39% of the vote last November, yet holding all the power, albeit with a stronger climate stance than the Harper government. I call this a "false majority".

I go back to sleep at night by reminding myself that **90 countries around the world have a better record on climate change than we do.** Why? In large part, because they use a form of proportional representation (PR) to elect their national assemblies. Out of the world's 35 strongest democracies, 25 use PR. And it's no accident that they're responsible for a shrinking share of world carbon emissions and score six points higher on Yale University's Environmental Performance index.

If we had a system of governance like they do, that truly represented all our collective voices, we'd have a democratic and peaceful way to curb oil and gas interests. This is why I'm so keen on electoral reform. **It's a long-term solution to recurring short-term crises.** It's time for Jack to stay in his box once and for all.

Secondly, as a woman, I'm upset that only 26% of Canada's parliamentarians are women. That places Canada 62nd in the world, well behind Angola, Belarus, Iraq, South Sudan and Afghanistan. My heart goes out to all the women who invested so much of themselves in the last federal election, only to be defeated.

But I sleep better at night after hearing that women fare better in countries using a form of PR and are not penalized for running for a smaller party, which many women choose to do.

Dr. Joanna Everitt, Dean of Arts at the University of New Brunswick says that if Canada switched to a proportional voting system, our percentage of women MPs would jump by at least

10% in the next election. If we stick with our current first past the post system, it will be 100 years before Parliament verges on gender parity! This is totally unacceptable.

Under First-Past-the-Post, only one person can be elected in each riding and that person tends to be white and male. But under PR, you can have multiple candidates in a district, working as a team, with an open list ballot. So it's in the interest of parties to put forward multiple, diverse candidates, and particularly women.

PR also involves consensus-building and compromise, qualities many women relate to more than the aggressive one-upmanship of First Past the Post. We prefer to give and take rather than take all!

And lastly, I'm a woman of faith and hope (and not just because I'm a member of Esquimalt United Church.) I'm drawn to a positive vision of the future, not a culture of fear and division.

The U.S. uses a first past the post (FPTP) voting system like us and look how it's polarized American society. We saw echoes of this in Canada and Toronto last year, which fortunately, we voted against. Fear is a terrible motivator.

Lately, I've been glued to CPAC's live coverage of the Special Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reform. I've watched nearly all of the 23 sessions so far and have felt privileged to participate through tweeting. I've been really impressed with the quality of 50+ witnesses from all over the world and the level of constructive debate within this all-party Committee. It's been a crash course in healthy electoral democracy – a far cry from Question Period in the House!

I've been delighted to learn that Canada has had 13 separate electoral reform processes, many of them citizen-led, at both the national and provincial level including BC, Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick, Manitoba, and PEI this October.

Surely we can finally say **YES** to what they've all recommended, namely some form of proportional representation. **We don't need a referendum** - we've done our homework!

It's time we matured and found ways to involve every citizen. I liken this moment in history to a king tide sweeping up the beach embracing every grain of sand. But we need to act now before that tide recedes. We have until December.

ERRE's Five Principles

I support the five principles outlined by our Minister for Democratic Institutions, Maryam Monsef. Namely, I want to see a proportional system that is:

- effective and legitimate;
- engages voters;
- is accessible and inclusive;
- has integrity;
- guarantees local representation.

We may have to rank our priorities, as there's no perfect voting system that meets all five values equally. At the top of my list are inclusiveness (representing all voters), legitimacy, and local representation.

I'd support any voting system that is truly proportional.

Fair Vote Canada's submission to the ERRE Committee identifies three forms of PR that could work in Canada. The first one is Mixed Member Proportional (**MMP**), recommended by the Law Commission of Canada in 2004 and used in many jurisdictions around the world. The second one is Single Transferable Vote (**STV**), recommended by BC's Citizens Assembly and approved by 58% of voters in 77 out of 79 ridings in 2005. And the third model is a new hybrid called Rural-Urban Proportional (**RUP**) that combines elements of MMP and STV and draws on the work of former Chief Electoral Officer, Jean-Pierre Kingsley.

There are many forms of PR and we can have a "**made-in-Canada**" version. In watching the ERRE hearings, I was surprised to learn, for example, that Winnipeg, Calgary and Edmonton used a form of STV in provincial elections during the 1920s-50s. The new Rural-Urban model of PR builds on this approach, while enhancing its proportionality.

My bottom line, however, is that we must choose a proportional system. Using ranked ballots alone in single member districts called Alternative Vote doesn't cut it. Having your 2nd or 3rd choice for an MP is not good enough, and could reward big centrist parties at the expense of smaller parties.

We live in a **representative democracy**. I trust the Parliamentary Committee will listen to the experts, as well as the people, and recommend a sensible solution to Parliament later this fall.

I see no need for a referendum given Canada's extensive study of electoral reform in the past, and the fact 63% of voters chose parties that campaigned on making every vote count in 2019. As previous referenda in Canada and Brexit have shown, a referendum is too vulnerable to manipulation by big money interests. I would, however, be open to a validating review/referendum of the new electoral system after experiencing two elections.

We need to experience "real change", before passing judgement.

I sincerely hope our new government will keep its promise to make 2015 the last election under first-past-the-post. Thank you for inviting me to participate.

*1651 words
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