

Submission to House of Commons Electoral Reform Committee

September 26, 2016, Bill Russell, Galiano Island, BC

Why the Australian system of voter participation is superior to that practiced in Canada and should be adopted.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Bill Russell and I am a dual citizen, Australian/Canadian national. I lived in Canada and voted here until I went to Australia in 1974, where I lived and became a Citizen, and returned to Canada in 2005 to live. So I have had a long exposure to both electoral systems and Parliaments in both countries, and as an avid political junkie have made a number of observations that I think are of use to Canadians.

The first point I wish to make is that our Parliament in Ottawa should make the decision on the voting changes in Canada. For two reasons. One is leadership on an important issue. It is a complex issue and I doubt there are sufficient resources to provide enough training to voters to make sense of it.

The second is that to hold a referendum would re-enforce the contention that our Parliament is not representative, and therefore the feelings of the registered voters need to be canvassed. We cannot have it both ways. Either our MP's are a close approximation to the voters wishes or they are not. I assume that is the purpose of a change to the voting system. To make our Parliament more representative.

Thirdly; the voting system is broken. Using it to canvas voter preferences casts folly on folly. Sixty percent of voters bother to turn up for the vote, and then that decision only needs fifty percent of them to agree? So a minority of voters will decide the outcome? That is what this committee is set up to change, is it not?

To address the points set out for the Committee I shall tackle them in order.

Point 1: Our FPTP voting system contributes to a general lack of interest in voting. Why vote when your participation is farcical. I give you the Separatist Government of Pauline Marois in Quebec in September of 2012. A Government with the avowed purpose of breaking up Canada. 74.6% of the voters turned out. Of those 31.9% voted for her party. Doing the maths, some 23% of registered voters put her party in power. All thanks to FPTP. This what the current voting system produces. I have yet to find a rational justification for its retention. It is simple; seems to be the common response.

Having been exposed to a Preferential Voting (PV) ballot for some thirty-three years, it is my assertion that it offers huge benefits. Clearly superior to FPTP. And superior to other proportional systems in that the voters choose MP's not Political Parties. The Parties choose the candidates, but the voters pick EVERY elected MP.

I have read on CBC web pages about the shortcomings of PV. The “donkey vote”, comes to mind. An expert submission to this committee. Fixed in 1984. Parties listed with candidates names, and listed at random. No more “donkey vote”.

An important aspect of PV is “directed preferences”. It is the horse trading that goes on between candidates in ridings where the outcome is not assured. In order to gain the preferential vote of a candidate not likely to win, a change to a platform will be offered to seal an agreement. This essentially guarantees the successful candidate represents the feelings of the greater number of voters. A near example is in the US election of 2016, which is Bernie Sanders getting representation on the Platform Committee of the Democrats, in order to make a commitment to Hillary Clinton. A minor player having an impact on a more likely winner.

The voting slip is not at all complicated in the PV system. For those who want it, there are Party officials standing outside polling booths handing out “how to vote” cards. For others, the instructions for filling in the ballot are extremely clear. The number of “informal” ballots is vanishingly small every election, affirming the simplicity of the process.

So the message is, I hope, clear. If we want to have a House that is what we profess to live under, a “representative” democracy, the PV is a clear winner.

Point 2: The above is a description of how the Australian voting system works, but the “representative” part is due in large part to compulsory voting. It took me some time to get used to the compulsory vote, but Canadians will get used to it. I see the issue this way.

If you are a Citizen of Canada you are expected to abide by its rules. The laws apply to everyone; there are no “outs” for people who wish to ignore them. It is your civic responsibility. The same logic should be applied to a “representative” democracy. We all live in one, and our lawmakers in Government are supposed to represent us as closely as possible. That seems to be a given and uncontested. You have a civic responsibility to vote for your representative. Canadians live in a representative democracy. We should not be allowed to “opt out”. The fine in Australia for not voting is nominal. Varies from level to level of Government. In the order of \$80. But it does not happen a lot. Compulsory voting was introduced in Queensland in 1915 when Australia was enjoying its fifteenth birthday, and for the Commonwealth in 1925. It was felt by Parliament that democracy was strengthened through compulsory voting. There was no referendum. Canada take note, please.

Point 3: The PV system as used in Australia is simple. Put the numbers from one to six in the boxes above the line or numbers one to twelve below the line. I have attached the last voting slip I completed as an example of just how simple. Not an issue. Would not pose a challenge to Canadians.

Point 4: We enjoy a robust polling system. But I would like to see a lot more than a slap on the wrist for deliberate voting scams like “robo calls”. Prison time at a minimum. These people are undermining our democracy.

Point 5: The PV system as used in Australia does not have any MP assigned a seat in Parliament that has not been won through the Ballot. Should be the case in Canada's new system as well.

In closing a brief story. The Jeff Kennett Government in Victoria Australia. Ultra conservative, and introduced draconian changes to Government, ostensibly as a cost saving measure. Very unpopular policy. Crowds demonstrating in the streets of Melbourne estimated at 150,000. Biggest crowd I ever saw in my thirty three years of living in Melbourne. People and placards everywhere around the Government building on Spring Street. One person I saw on the news had a placard that read: "Don't blame me, I didn't vote for him". It is a message that would carry no particular weight in the FPTP system in Canada with voting optional. In Victoria, or anywhere in Australia, for that matter, Jeff Kennett could NOT get elected with less than 50% of the vote. That is 50% of ALL registered voters. Love him or hate him, Jeff Kennett had the support of the majority of the eligible voters in Victoria. He and his Government. You cannot get into office without it.

Can't make the same claim in Canada. We need a PV system and compulsory voting to make our representative democracy strong. I urge this Committee to seriously consider my advice, and adopt this tried and proven model.

Respectfully

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