

Submission to the Special Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reform

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Summary

Canada is at a crossroads with an historic opportunity to change its voting system to one based on proportional representation (PR) where every Canadian's vote would result in the election of a representative/party of their choice. The goal of electoral reform should be to change Canada's voting system to one where the percentage of the popular vote a party receives is equal to the percentage of seats it receives in the House of Commons, something that can only be achieved by implementing a system of PR. PR can be contrasted with our current voting system, First-Past-the-Post (FPTP), an archaic system that originated in the 12th century. FPTP allows either of Canada's two major parties to win majority governments by getting approximately 40% of the vote and 55% of the seats giving them 100% of the power. This despite the fact that 60% of the population did not vote for that particular party. Not only is this completely undemocratic, it flies in the face of effectiveness and legitimacy, which is the Electoral Reform Committee's first stated principle for electoral reform.

Recommendation 1

It is the job and the responsibility of the Special Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reform, as elected representatives, to select a **made-in-Canada voting system based on proportional representation** and to recommend its adoption by Parliament.

Recommendation 1 relates to principle 1: effectiveness and legitimacy

There are a number of PR systems available including Mixed Member Proportional (MMP), Single Transferable Vote (STV), and a relatively new model proposed for Canada by Fair Vote Canada - Rural-Urban Proportional. The Committee can rely on the technical expertise of other organizations, such as Fair Vote Canada, to help with the details of whatever system it chooses.

The Committee should give serious consideration to the made-in-Canada MMP open list system that the Law Commission of Canada recommended in 2004, given the lengthy consultations with experts and the general public that took place to develop it.

Under FPTP strategic voting is a real issue in Canadian elections. In the 2015 election the Liberals won a landslide victory of 55% of the seats in the House (based on only 39% of the popular vote) because people were terrified of splitting the vote between the two centre left parties allowing Stephen Harper's Conservative Party to win again. But for that fear both the NDP and the Green Party would have received significantly more

votes. Wouldn't it be great if people did not have to do that anymore? That will be the case when a PR voting system is implemented. The big bonus is that no one's vote will be wasted.

Alternative vote, or preferential ballot, is not a good option to replace FPTP. It is not proportional and would make very little difference to the overall results of an election. In fact there is some suggestion that the vote would be even more distorted if alternative vote were implemented.

Recommendation 2

As soon as the new system has been selected the government should mount a robust multifaceted education campaign about it so that Canadians will understand why it has been chosen and how it works.

Recommendation 2 relates to principle 2: voter engagement

I am a longtime member of and volunteer for Fair Vote Canada and over the years I have encountered intelligent, educated Canadians who have no idea about how different systems of PR work and who think it's really complicated. Not only that but they haven't given any thought to the problems with FPTP and how undemocratic our current voting system is. This speaks to the need for a massive and multifaceted education campaign, including information about what's wrong with FPTP, on as many platforms as possible as soon as the Committee has selected a new voting system. Education is critical to achieving success with a new system.

PR systems are not that complicated. CPG Grey has created an excellent series of short videos on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLej2SIXPEd37YwwEY7mm0WyZ8cfB1TxXa>) that explain different voting systems. While the calculation of the vote in a PR system can be complicated, what people really need to know is how to mark their ballots and the reasoning behind the voting system, which these videos demonstrate in mere minutes. Canadians are intelligent and if they are presented with accurate information in a timely way they will find it easy to understand.

As well, with a democratic system of voting and a more collaborative Parliament people who have disengaged in politics because they believe that they can't make a difference will be more motivated to vote.

Recommendation 3

The government should not hold a referendum on this issue.

Recommendation 3 relates to principle 2: voter engagement

The Minister of Democratic Institutions and the Special Committee on Electoral Reform have encouraged the following forms of voter engagement to ensure that the views of all Canadians are included in the electoral reform discussion:

- All MPs have been encouraged to hold town halls in their constituencies and to report back to the Committee.
- Canadians have been encouraged to tweet questions to the Committee during hearings and to send it briefs.
- Citizens have been encouraged to hold electoral reform dialogues with others.

It should not be overlooked that there have been copious consultations held in the past. From 2001 to 2004 the Law Commission of Canada conducted a multifaceted public consultation and engagement strategy to gather the insights and opinions of a broad cross section of Canadians on electoral system reform. As well over the past decade two robust citizens' assemblies have been held, one in B.C. and one in Ontario, not to mention consultations in other provinces.

Canadians have been consulted enough. It's time for the Committee to make a decision and to provide the public with accurate and thorough information about how the decision was made and how the new voting system will work.

The Conservative Party of Canada supports holding a referendum on electoral reform so that all Canadians can express their views. This would be a very dangerous thing to do for the following reasons:

- The bar has been set too high for past referendums on electoral reform, which has resulted in failure. How come a government can form a majority with 39% of the vote, a province can separate from the rest of Canada with 50.1% of the vote and yet to achieve electoral reform it is necessary to get 60%?
- If people have not received accurate information about the issue they are likely to vote against it. Witness Brexit. The recent British referendum on leaving the E.U. has been deeply divisive.
- The phrasing of the question can have an enormous impact on the result. Cf. *Canadians Deserve Better than a Referendum* at <http://www.prvote.com/>. In this article the Strategists say that "It has become fashionable for the Conservatives to say Canadians deserve a referendum on this question [of electoral reform]. But Canadians deserve better than a referendum on this. They deserve the best thinking of our elected representatives".

- People get incorrect information in the mainstream media, which is concentrated in the hands of right wing corporate owners, and which is consistently negative about proportional representation voting systems.

Recommendation 4

The Special Committee on Electoral Reform should recommend that Elections Canada work with the provinces to ensure that information about Canadian democracy is included in public/secondary school curricula from coast to coast to coast.

Recommendation 4 relates to principle 2: voter engagement

When education on Canada's democratic practices is included in public and secondary school curriculums from coast to coast to coast youth will understand the importance of their participation in the voting process. This could be the best way to engage Canadian youth in this process. If people start to vote when they are young research indicates that they will continue to vote.

Other Considerations

Principle 4: Integrity

PR will introduce greater civility and collaboration in politics because of the strong probability of electing minority governments, which will require the formation of formal coalitions. And indeed how can things get much worse than they are at the moment, with the mud slinging in Question Period and the partisan politics in which some political parties feel compelled to engage. Some of Canada's greatest accomplishments have been accomplished with minority governments, e.g. universal health care, CPP.

Detractors of PR often cite Israel and Italy, the two worst examples of PR, instead of the many success stories like New Zealand, Germany and Scotland. And Canada has had 21 elections since World War II compared with 17 in Italy!

Principle 5: Local representation

The Committee and various witnesses have discussed the subject of local representation with no clear agreement on how important it is. Over time I have tended to vote for the party that is presenting a platform that reflects my principles. This is born out in CPG Grey's video *Why the UK Election Results are the Worst in History* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9rGX91rq5I&index=16&list=PLej2SIXPEd37YwwEY7mm0WyZ8cfB1TxXa>) where he indicates that few citizens know who their MP is, they just know that the party they voted for is going to represent their views at the national level.

Proliferation of Small Parties

A number of people have expressed concerns about the proliferation of small parties in a proportional voting system. In fact there are already 22 parties registered in Canada under our FPTP system, of which the smallest ones don't receive enough votes to get a seat.

Most countries with PR voting systems implement a threshold of 3 - 5% of the vote. Recently an MP at a town hall suggested a 10 to 15% threshold. This is ridiculous - no other country in the world sets the bar this high and it could shut out the Green Party, a well respected small party that has a lot to offer Canada.

Conclusion

Canada has a serious democratic deficit at the moment. To quote Gareth Kirkby's Huffington Post article in 2015 "We're in the midst of an incrementally created democratic deficit that after nine years of accumulated budget cuts, abuse of power, and muzzling diverse voices has now arguably put at risk our democracy's health and vigour. Scientists, academics, and non-governmental organizations have recently demonstrated on Parliament Hill, published reports, and created websites detailing damage to national evidence-gathering and public conversations about ideas and policies".¹

Among other things, Canada's Prime Minister has more power than either the President of the United States or the Prime Minister of the U.K. The Fair Elections Act needs serious amendment to reinstate voter identification processes that were removed in 2014 and to enhance the role of Elections Canada in educating the Canadian public, particularly at the critical juncture when a new voting system is introduced. Not to mention the grave threat to Canada and the world posed by climate change or the negotiation of secret trade deals, such as the TPP, that give away Canada's sovereignty to foreign corporations.

None of the above, as well as a host of other issues, will be seriously dealt with until we change our voting system to one that is more collaborative and representative.

¹ Gareth Kirkby. "Stephen Harper's Legacy Will Be a Democratic Deficit". Huffington Post, Posted: 10/15/2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/gareth-kirkby/stephen-harpers-legacy_b_8295588.html, Date accessed: 09/06/2016.