

2016 October 6th

To: Canadian Parliamentary Special Committee on Electoral Reform

From: Esther D. Harrison and John W. Thornton

Burnaby South Constituency, British Columbia

Subject: **Expression of Preference Re: Voting Systems**

Summary:

We think Canada's pure first past the post (FPTP) regional representation system must be replaced.

Our first preference is for Mixed Member Proportional (MMP), with Mixed Member Majority (MMM) a close second choice.

We find the brief submitted by the New Zealand Electoral Commission, explaining that country's adoption of MMP, compelling. We think the NZ system is a very good balance between regional representation and proportional representation, without becoming complex or opaque.

However, we think the New Zealand MMP system would need adaptations to work well in Canada. For example, we do not think it is necessary to allocate 40% of the seats in the House of Commons to party list candidates to achieve adequate representation of "thinly spread" minority parties. A 20% allocation to the popularly elected party list ("at large") MPs would be satisfactory to us.

We think it is extremely important that a majority of MPs have "faced the public," during an election, and be directly elected. We are not in favour of expanding the number of seats in the House of Commons by more than say, 5%, to accommodate an MMP or MMM system, which implies somewhat larger constituencies than exist today.

Background

- John attended the Federal Electoral Reform Community Dialogue session at the Sandman Hotel in Vancouver on September 9th.
- Esther and John have both studied and discussed the material on the Parliament of Canada website titled “Electoral Systems and Electoral Reform in Canada and Elsewhere: An Overview” by Andre Barnes, Dara Lithwick, & Erin Virgint, Legal and Social Affairs Division, dated 11 January 2016 *Revised 23 June 2016*
- Esther and John have reviewed a number of briefs that have been submitted to the Committee, notably the one from the New Zealand Electoral Commission.

General Thoughts and Overall Principles

- The political preferences of the citizens must be approximately represented by seats in Parliament. Parties that achieve a significant minority of the overall popular vote ought to be assured of some seats, as well as participation on Parliamentary committees. In our opinion, exact proportional representation is not required for a fully satisfactory democracy.
- it is desirable that single issue, or fringe type, or frivolous parties not occupy seats in Parliament, i.e. those parties which will not be able to contribute to the full range of topics that must be debated in Parliament or in committees.
- it is desirable that a very substantial majority of Parliamentarians have faced public scrutiny, and are directly elected, and that party list MPs not constitute more than, say, 20% of the seats in Parliament.

Voting Systems We Do Not Support

1 First Past the Post

- pure FPTP blocks representation of minority parties whose popular vote is spread evenly across the nation.
- this disadvantage outweighs the touted advantage of more regularly producing majority governments.
- has the disadvantage that it forces strategic voting rather than capturing the true political preferences of the citizenry.

2 Alternative Vote (Rank Ordered Ballot with instant run off)

- too strongly favours parties (or, the party) that are (is) in the centre of the political spectrum. Under this voting system Canada might never be able to shake itself loose from a centre party that may be mediocre or complacent.

3 Two-Round

- a two-round election might induce voter and candidate fatigue and be more costly with little benefit.
- in many elections, it will produce Parliaments that under represent minority parties whose popular vote is evenly spread.

4 Block Vote

- will require ridings that, certainly in the North and rural areas, are overly large geographically, making campaigning much more costly.

5 List Proportional Representation Systems

- unsatisfactory because there is no association between any MPs and geographic constituencies. We need a majority of MPs to be regionally representative.
- unsatisfactory because our urban areas, which have larger populations, will vote for candidates they have heard of, or know from the media. Rural candidates will be less well known (or completely unknown), and hence rural areas will be chronically underrepresented.
- closed list system: candidates do not have to face public scrutiny, so party stalwarts will tend to be the ones higher on the lists.
- open list system: impossible for voters to review the curriculum vitae of possibly dozens (or hundreds) of candidates, and pick or rank order the best 10 or 20. Ballots will be very unwieldy leading to voter fatigue or confusion.

6 STV and SNTV

- too complicated and abstract. Voters may not trust the system to be free of corruption. For example, how are the excess votes of an elected candidate actually reallocated to the remaining candidates? It is a difficult thing for a citizen to determine the proportions that must be calculated, and it can easily make a difference in a close election.
- STV was voted down twice by British Columbia citizens.

Systems We Do Support

1 Mixed Member Majority (MMM)

- straightforward system
- parties with a significant minority of the popular vote are assured of at least a few seats
- the incentives to vote strategically are reduced, so results are more accurately reflective of the broad political will
- when coupled with FPTP election of candidates in ridings, this system holds the possibility of stable majority governments
- each constituency has a directly elected representative
- **with a further refinement:** it is desirable that **parties be given flexibility in allocating** their “at large” or “party list” candidates so as to permit regional and linguistic representation, and a knowledge base, that complements the MPs that were directly elected, i.e. party lists should not be a prioritized closed list, nor an electable open list, but rather a “**talent pool**” that includes candidates who ran, but were not elected in their ridings. The possibility of being appointed to an “at large” seat after the election ends, would provide encouragement to minority party candidates who face tough uphill battles in their respective ridings.
- no more than 20% of the House of Commons seats should be available for “party list” MPs and the ridings would have to be redrawn so as to not inflate the number of seats too much.

2 Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)

- same comments as for MMM, but with the mild disadvantage of making majority governments a more distant possibility.
- there would need to be reasonable measures taken to prevent undue expansion of the number of seats in Parliament.

- the New Zealand system (as described in the brief from their Electoral Commission) is satisfactory except for “Step 6” of the Sainte-Lague Formula. After the electoral commission finalizes the set of list candidates for each party, we would prefer to see the parties themselves be given a week following the election to hold a conclave to allocate list candidates to the list seats awarded, rather than the electoral commission doing the allocation from a pre-set ordered list. Again, the list candidates should be treated as a pool of talent, and the intention would be to allow the parties an opportunity to “fine tune” their parliamentary team to achieve better regional representation, etc.

Other Related Issues

1 Lowering the Voting Age

- our basic position is that we want every vote to be an informed and thoughtful vote. If a young adult is informed on the current issues, and wishes to express his or her political will, then we are comfortable with a change to the voting age. But a mandatory course in civics at the grade 11 level ought to be a prerequisite before lowering the voting age.

- correlation to age for eligibility for military service is also a useful guide to an appropriate lower age bound

2 Compulsory Voting

- we are opposed to compulsory voting. It is better that politically disengaged citizens not cast votes, since they are likely to be uninformed votes, and will distort election results. The same concern applies no matter whether there are threats for not voting or incentives to encourage voting.

3 Online Voting

- no. At this time, there are too many potential problems around voter identification, vote validation, hacking, and privacy. Imagine what would happen if, even though an election was flawless, somebody announces they hacked the voting? The disputes might cloud the results such that the whole thing would have to be re-done.

4 National Indicative Referendum or Plebiscite

- a non-binding, rank ordered choice, nation-wide, indicative referendum ought to be held to help guide the Electoral Reform Committee to a final recommendation for Parliament to consider.

- failing that, a referendum on the new voting system used in the next election ought to be held after its completion. This “evolutionary” approach to electoral reform was taken by New Zealand.

5 Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaigns

- it is important to dampen, not necessarily completely eliminate, the potentially corrupting influence of money on MPs. Campaign contributions by corporations and unions must be strictly limited in order to ensure a proper democracy. Likewise for individuals’ political donations, and gifts, etc. from lobbyists. Complete auditing is needed on these points, e.g. to determine ultimate beneficial ownership of corporations, to ensure compliance.

- public funding of all political parties that achieve a minimum percentage of the popular vote, should be restored. Provide public funding to parties based on popular vote received (easily done under MMM or MMP via the “party list” ballot) to be paid monthly until the following election.

6 Expansion of Concepts and Principles to the Provincial Level

- ways and means of promoting electoral reform to the Provincial level, nation-wide, ought to be considered after a decision at the federal level is completed. We think FPTP should be eliminated everywhere in Canada.

7 Many thanks to the Committee for their kind consideration of these ideas! Parliamentary engagement of Canadians on this issue has been extremely welcome.