

Brief to Special Committee on Electoral Reform
Parliament of Canada

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I turned 18 the summer before the autumn election that swept Progressive Conservatives out of power in Canada and Jean Chrétien's Liberals into government. Though 18, I had considered carefully my political position and came out on the protectionist side of the North American free trade debate. I understood first-past-the-post quite well, but voted for what I believed in, as I have done many times since. I voted for the National Party under the late Mel Hurtig in Winnipeg, expecting to send one tiny message with my vote. It was the first of many futile votes for myself, and just another futile election in a string of many since Confederation for Canadians.

The way I recall my introduction to politics to this day, 23 years later, is as follows: Jean Chrétien said he was against NAFTA. The country was through with the Progressive Conservatives and so, alternating from one party to another as is typical of first-past-the-post elections, it swung back to the Liberals. Once Chrétien's Liberals began to reign – and I use that word intentionally as first-past-the-post confers a kind of absolute 4-year power on a government, so long as the MPs of its party are whipped into line – they turned around on their promise and promptly signed NAFTA.

The response to NAFTA in Chiapas, Mexico was the formation of the Zapatistas, an indigenous-led, grassroots warrior and subsidiary-economy-based organization committed to direct action against NAFTA. That is the response of a people who know they are about to be robbed, and retain a cultural memory and sense of self and place adequate enough to mobilize them into action. The Canadian response to the flip-flopping on free trade was to realize that both governing parties – Liberals and PCs – were more or less the same on the macro economic issues of trade and sovereignty, and they began in large numbers to disengage from the political process altogether. In 1993, 7 in 10 eligible Canadians voted. That number declined to 2 in 3, then 3 in 5 by the 3rd Liberal majority and the Martin minority of 2004. A bump in turnout signalled an end to Liberal rule during the scandal of the Gomery enquiry in 2006, as 65% of eligible voters came out, but then the number returned steadily to 60%, or 3 in 5 Canadians voting for the second Conservative minority victory and the 2011 majority.
<http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=ele&dir=turn&document=index&lang=e>

Imagine an elementary school class endeavouring to go on a major field trip and for every 3 students lined up to go, 2 are refusing and do not want to participate. Could the teacher coerce the other 2 to go? Possibly, but they might resent it. Should the field trip be cancelled? No, because 3 still want to go (though of these 3, no 2 want to go to the same place). Soon the teacher realizes their class is not at all on the same page, and starts to give up on a cohesive strategy for teaching them as a group. A similar fragmentation into private social and political reality has been taking place in Canadian society, driven by an electoral system that does not pool together enough of a cohesive political will to give the citizens the sense of a shared project, but does award power to just large enough a political bloc to let people know that they are being ruled, and in the case of our party system ruled most often by one single party. Of the 16 majority governments since WWI in Canada, only 4 actually earned a majority of votes. Granted there are many other social and technological forces tearing our society apart, but the lack of a shared polity has allowed the country covering the second-largest land mass on Earth to become an economic object of special interests. The 'stability' of first-past-the-post so often touted by its apologists is a shorthand for 'place to invest' borrowed crudely from the world of investment banking and imposed upon layers of cultural and ecological diversity, regional histories, linguistic and social particularity. In short, first-past-the-post allows for the domination of the whole country by those with a narrow set of economic interests, though in some future bi-polar electoral swing, more sinister forces yet can be handed the golden ring of power. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/canada-election-first-past-the-post-opinion-1.3283979>

In our voting for MP, the biggest number of votes wins the seat. Some people without giving it much thought, think that majority rules, but actually it is a more sinister political logic: obtain the biggest bloc and one controls the whole territory. One major problem with this is that the 'winner' – and first-past-the-post clearly defines winners and losers – does not need to be responsive to the concerns of all her constituents. She only needs to maintain her singularly-largest bloc of supporters to win the whole electoral district. If one considers the logic of this control and domination, it is not hard to understand that another social organization operates in a way similar to power-achieving political parties or MPs: gangs. If one thinks I am exaggerating, I encourage one to watch the last 20 years of animosity in the House of Commons - to see the lack of an answer more often than not in Question Period that matches the question asked; the cheering, leering and jeering as well – to discern that hyper-partisanship overtook democratic concerns *for all constituents*, as represented by the diversity of ideology and votes cast in any federal riding. The example par excellence of this 'wearing of colours' came when Conservative Pierre Polivève attended a government announcement

before the 2015 election wearing his Conservative Party attire, an antidemocratic conflation of party with government that borders on dangerous.

But I submit that rather than focus on the actions and misbehaviours of certain agents, we examine the structural logic underpinning the ability to act in this way with nearly complete procedural impunity but even more discouraging, political impunity. One can suggest that with the change in government in 2015 the voters enforced the accountability built-in to the electoral system, namely: they voted out the government. One can also argue, however, that the majority power in the hands of a government, combined with the disappearance of the individual MP through the whipping of votes and the concentration of power into the hands of the cabinet and especially the Prime Minister's Office, allowing a government to pass a 450+ page omnibus budget implementation bill without accepting a solitary cross-party amendment indicates that a party can remake the entire country in its own ideological image in the span of one term.

I also would suggest that the hyper-partisanship and will to dictate of one party in government is sown on the opposition benches. Some years before using the omnibus hammer to alter over 70 Acts of Parliament, the former Prime Minister Harper criticized these sorts of bills under the Liberal government as undemocratic. <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/john-ivison-how-stephen-harper-learned-to-love-omnibus-bills> One can compare the pent up sense of impotence a party must feel in Opposition to a majority government to a heavyweight boxer on the ropes without a punch to throw. But if that boxer comes off the ropes and throws his own punches, he will throw all of the frustration and previous helplessness into those punches. The decade by decade blows the two parties that have governed have imposed upon each other, each taking their turn to advance their interests and to put the electoral 'losers' in their place outside of power, have been inflicted more than anything upon our democracy and upon the national political psyche of the country. Like a boxer that has been in the same sport for too long, Canadian democracy has become bloodied, bruised and brain-damaged by false majority after false majority imposing its will upon the nation, each with its own cadre of special interests and networks. Perhaps a far more sophisticated and covert Mogadishu?

A former Green Party candidate for Parliament in both 2004 and 2011, in the latter election I ran in a riding that can only be described as a cartographer's practical joke. Kildonan-St. Paul, created in time for the 2004 federal general election, covers two sides of Winnipeg's Red River and both sides of Winnipeg's perimeter, thus including two distinctive suburban and two distinctive ex-urban regions. There is little binding the electoral district together. I know that proponents of, or moreso apologists of first-past-the-post are concerned about giving up

there local MP. Those favouring a Mixed-Member Proportional system highlight that on the first of two votes, voters will still select a local MP, only in a now-larger riding (or else one would have to enlarge the number of seats in Parliament itself.) Some apologists for FPTP have said that we need to maintain the size of ridings. Currently around 100,000 people are 'represented' by 1 MP. I disagree entirely, and said so when I ran. I ran saying that I was not running to represent the people of the riding, for nobody could adequately represent the diverse opinions and politics of that many people. Instead, the MP needs to coordinate and facilitate democracy, create local citizens committees based on common issues and concerns, and have citizens communicate with each other through the MP's office, the MP of which now functions far more in the true spirit of public service, rather than perennial partisanship. When I ran for the Greens in Kildonan-St. Paul but found myself living in Winnipeg North and voting NDP in a close race, I realized the gig was up, that it was futile to be a 4th or even a 3rd party partisan under first-past-the-post and that I would dedicate my political efforts to post-partisan democratic education and engagement. As the Irish Rovers might have sang: 'If this ain't the biggest mix-up, that you have ever seen, my vote was with the orange but my heart was with the Greens.' One can only try to plant good seeds in bad soil for so long before one realizes the need to spend more time composting, working the soil of Canadian democracy towards a healthy future garden.

I would personally be thrilled with a MMP system, preferably open-list so as to maintain more power in the hands of voters than in those of political party elites. That said, MMP is still very party-based, and it seems that ultimately representation, if we are not to give up entirely on the idea, is grounded in strong individual personalities, in individual accountability, and in personal leadership and initiative, and not only from the prime minister, supposed 'first among equals.'

It would be advantageous to create a system that would present independents a greater opportunity at victory, on the basis of their own personal recognizance within their local cities and towns. As such, a Single Transferable Vote system would be preferable. Manitoba used STV in Winnipeg for many years as did Alberta; STV's threshold, while complicated to understand the first time one hears it, is not so complex the second time around. It does, however, offer maximum value to the most educated voter but still allows a less educated one to rank as many candidates as they know. It brings the politics back onto the local level, though with the multi-member riding sizes, that level could incorporate half or a third of a city like Winnipeg. Federal campaigns are so centralized that giving voters the chance to rank a long list of candidates and the opportunity to pick and choose individuals advocating for a range of issues, bringing a diversity of experience from a broader range of ethnic and gender backgrounds means that Parliament will start to be constituted more in line with the real, lived

diversity existent within Canadian society. Political diversity must be championed as much as and more than are the softer, less committal concepts of multiculturalism and cultural diversity.

STV furthermore pits candidates of the same political party against each other, leaving far more need for individual candidates to differentiate themselves from the herd, breaking away from the brand and its platitudes in favour of some real talk on real issues with citizens. So few Canadians belong to political parties that any system that discourages control of the political process by parties, or moreso creates space for creative, intelligent individuals and smaller parties to compete for Parliamentary seats on a more even footing. That principle of democracy and equality must be fundamental to whatever new system is designed. The Fair Vote Canada presentation to ERRE cited a new Rural-Urban PR model that was innovated during the process of presenting to the committee provides an ideal mix of STV in cities and single-member ridings rurally with a regional proportional top-up of about 15% for rural areas.

Having multiple MPs representing each citizen will be a boon. Under the one MP per riding system, if you are ideologically at odds with your MP, it will be hard to forward your agenda without being stonewalled, ignored, mocked.. After all, like millions of votes each election, dismissing diversity of political wills has become a hallmark of Canadian 'democracy.' One can approach various MPs on various issues of varying nature, knowing one might be a good systematic problem-solver while the other might be stronger advocate for change.

One needs only watch Danish series Borgen – available in Canada only on TV Ontario, and a few years after its popularity worldwide – to see what a mature polity might look like in Canada, and to understand that after an election, while one party's seat count may crash and the election may seem like a 'loss,' more than anything each party is still part of governance in that they are always having to speak across party lines to work cooperatively with MPs of other parties, either as part of government or in opposition. After 150 years of being a country, is it not time for Canada to move to a more mature, accountable polity?

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/election-reform-opinion-1.3767626>

Facing the threats of global mass extinctions due to climate change and the need to work collaboratively to solve our problems, the timing could not be more ripe for implementing either an MMP or STV system. Borgen illustrates that the lack of one-party majoritarian control over government does not have to 'destabilize' the country, but actually can radically change the political culture of a country and its Parliament. At a time when Canada needed to take climate action, it sat paralyzed by denial representing 39.5 of the voting electorate, or, multiplied by a 60% turnout, really only representing ~24% of the actual electorate. That low level of support for so radical an agenda can only demoralize a country's democracy and

undermine its political culture. Even so important a process as considering a change to our electoral system has been tuned out by the vast majority of Canadians, not to mention given only passing treatment by mainstream Canadian media.

An STV system would challenge Canadians in a good way. It would force us to know who are our candidates, to consider the intersection of party with individual, party leader with platform, and to research towards an action more elaborate than the insulting 'single X' mark ballot. STV is far superior to an alternative voting system, which is still a blunt by-product of a winners-losers unhelpful political dichotomy. STV would be dynamic, would create a stronger link between movements on all parts of the political spectrum and politics, which is currently a dirty word to many talented, caring people in our communities organizing through non-profits and small businesses.

Ultimately, it's up to this committee at this time to take action and to push the House of Commons to adopt a new system. A referendum will be a death knell for positive change and is highly unnecessary given the current makeup of Parliament by a large number of MPs willing to give up the status quo in the interest of leaving behind a long-lasting democratic legacy. The precedents exist both in Canada and throughout most of the OECD countries, meaning any changes made can be evaluated down the road after 2-3 elections.

There has been an uptick in organizing to mobilize the indigenous and the youth votes, particularly in Winnipeg. I am part of those efforts, but it is hard to advocate for voting when the cynicism these groups have towards the electoral processes is honestly earned by a system bound to discount most of these voices regardless, their ballots all but wasted as status quo candidate after status quo candidate is elected. Canada turns 150 very soon. Please deliver on the prime minister's promise to make every vote count towards seats in time for the 2019 election. Let's change this country's destiny through a more collaborative political process that will force us to have broader political conversations establishing our common needs and values as a nation. That is what grown-ups in a long-term relationship do. This committee can bump us up to this more mature political level, or it can take us back to kindergarten, 2 of the 5 children sulking in the corner or stopping to attend school altogether. The fate of our country depends on this committee's recommendations, just as the fate of the world turns on Canada on many issues. Without functional democratic elections, much positive change does not become possible. It's time we move forward in the correct direction.

'The time to hesitate is through;
No time to wallow in the mire.'

-Jim Morrison