



Federal Liberal Association
Laurier-Sainte-Marie

Laurier-Sainte-Marie
Town Hall Meeting
on
Electoral Reform

Meeting held on October 1st 2016
at the
Espace Confort Montreal Hotel
In Montreal, Quebec

Executive Summary

- 1) Democratic legitimacy must be addressed in any electoral reform process. Democratic legitimacy is ensured when the composition of the elected legislature is as close as possible to the electoral outcome.
- 2) FPTP is simple and grants decisive majorities which are seen as significant advantages. Coalitions are deemed inherently unstable and force government parties to compromise their values and platforms in order to accommodate coalition partners. However, the participants agree that any new voting system should make place for smaller parties in the policymaking process (point 1).
- 3) Any electoral reform should aim to respect the value of each vote by granting viable choices to all citizens in local ridings. Per-vote public subsidies to political parties should also be reinstated.
- 4) Selecting competent candidates was deemed more important than achieving gender parity and the latter should not be imposed by law. Monetary incentives should be granted to parties that have minority candidates elected.
- 5) Citizens should not have to pay in order to join a party and they should be able to choose their candidates freely, without any intervention from the party apparatus. Furthermore, party members should be able to choose themselves the names on party lists if a proportional system is adopted, those names should not be imposed from the top.
- 6) Making voting mandatory was widely rejected. Reception was also mixed on allowing electronic voting due to numerous concerns about security, reliability and the possibility of fraud. Participants were much more open to the use of electronic means as auxiliaries to enhance voting experience and improve voting turnout.
- 7) Participants considered that parliamentary consensus represents the people's will most accurately. They were hesitant to implement some forms of direct democracy since they felt that elected officials were more informed than average citizens. The use of petitions with mandatory response from the government was met favorably. Participants were open to the idea of introducing regular non-partisan Town Hall Meetings hosted, for example, by their MPs. These Town Halls would inform citizens and would also hold MPs accountable for their actions in the House of Commons.
- 8) The government must take steps to educate Canadians about the electoral process and our democratic system and values, either through consultations and civic courses held by Election Canada or by making it part of Service Canada's mandate.
- 9) New social media technologies should be used as much as possible in order to multiply outlets through which citizens may follow the workings of the House of Commons not only during the Question Period but also during individual hearings of House and Senate committees.

Introduction: The Town Hall Meeting

The Town Hall on Electoral Reform of Laurier-Sainte-Marie was held on October 1st, 2016 from 6:30 PM to 9:10 PM in the meeting room of the Espace Confort Hotel in Montreal.

It was convened following the Public Consultation held in Laval in the presence of the Honourable Maryam Monsef, Minister of Democratic Institutions, and Eva Nassif, MP of Vimy, on September 16th.

Beside the President and the Secretary, 21 participants were counted at the meeting, the vast majority hailing from Laurier-Sainte-Marie. Mr. Nicholas Malouin, President of the Federal Liberal Association of Laurier-Sainte-Marie, presided the assembly with Mr. Jean-Pierre Arcoragi, member of the Board of Directors of Laurier-Sainte-Marie, acting as Secretary.

While organized by the Federal Liberal Association of Laurier-Sainte-Marie, the meeting was not convened as an assembly of Liberal members. Electoral Reform being an issue touching all Canadians, it was decided that the Town Hall was to be grassroots, a non-partisan event open to the public regardless of background or political affiliation. Attendance was completely free and walk-in participants were welcomed if place allowed inside the room.

The aim of this Town Hall Meeting was to:

- Assemble citizens from the federal riding of Laurier-Sainte-Marie that wished to exchange and debate about the reform of our electoral system and thus improve our democracy;
- Allow participants to give their inputs on electoral reform by presenting their questions, preoccupations and ideas to the Special Committee of the House of Commons;
- Provide a safe, non-partisan setting, without predetermined values or proposals that would be open to citizens from all backgrounds and political affiliations.

To better ensure the neutral setting of the Town Hall Meeting, no member of Parliament or outside speakers were present at the event. The role of the President and the Secretary was thus strictly to maintain the decorum of the assembly, guide the discussions in order to let citizens express themselves freely and record their preoccupations and suggestions.

To respect the tight deadline allotted for depositing briefs imposed by the Special Committee, the meeting was advertised through an invitation sent to a bank of nearly 4,000 e-mail addresses. It was also advertised on the Liberal Party of Canada's Events website and shared on Facebook in order to allow as many people as possible to attend the meeting.

To try to engage a wider public, we also communicated the event to our network of contacts throughout the greater Montreal area. We also invited independent organizations promoting Electoral reform, such as Fair Vote Canada and Mouvement Démocratie Nouvelle, to our Town Hall Meeting.

Town Hall Meeting's agenda:

- A. President's welcome followed by the details of the evening's events;
- B. A short presentation of the different voting systems. All participants were provided with photocopies of the official diagrams of each voting system, as prepared by the Library of Parliament;
- C. After the presentation, the floor was opened to the attendees in order to express their questions in a sequential order:
 - 1. First, strictly on the voting systems themselves;
 - 2. Then, on what should be reformed or improved, besides the mechanics of the voting system, like intra-party processes to determine the choice of candidates, voting conditions, etc.;
 - 3. And, finally, on what should be done beyond electoral reform to improve Canada's democratic system;
- D. A question period was allowed at the end of the meeting.

Thirty minutes was provided for discussions on each topic. However, we are glad to report that the attendees were so involved in the process, so eager to have their inputs recorded, that the time allowed for each topic was extended from 30 to 45 minutes.

The room was almost filled to capacity with a good mix of Francophones and Anglophones, men and women. The atmosphere was very cordial throughout the evening. The president of the riding, Mr. Nicholas Malouin, spoke mostly in French but Anglophones were not left out. It is important to note that most Anglophones attending the meeting understood French quite well.

Mr. Malouin made clear that while the evening was organized and hosted by the Liberal Federal Association, it was important to get the opinion of a good cross section of voters living in the riding. Attendees were also told that a report of the meeting would be drafted and presented to the Special Electoral Reform's Committee of the House of Commons.

Note to the reader: The discussion was very lively and the President did not want to prevent the free flow of ideas. Therefore, the ideas presented here are not the results of a formal vote but came out organically during the discussion.

Electoral Reform

One of the first questions that came out from the assembly was: “What is wrong with the current system?”. We explained that the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system was originally designed for a bi-party, Westminster-style political system. In modern times, FPTP is now somewhat dysfunctional in a multi-party system since it is possible for a party to gain power with much less than 50% of the popular vote, which is not a very appealing idea in a democracy. While a number of participants mentioned the example of the previous Conservative government, we also brought to the assembly’s attention the last elections which brought the Liberal Party of Canada to power with an overwhelming majority of elected MPs while only 39% of ballots were cast in favour of that party. This is (non-partisan) proof that the first past the post system taints the democratic legitimacy of all governments in Canada. It was also pointed out that the same problem exists at the provincial level.

While describing alternative voting systems, we tried to set those systems in a wider context. Therefore, we explained very briefly how some aspects of electoral systems worked in different countries. For example, we brought forward some aspects of the electoral systems implemented in Israel, Sweden, Germany, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand in order to illustrate some specific points we wanted to make.

Despite the alternatives presented, some participants maintained that the advantage with our system is that it is simple and thus less intimidating: for them, keeping it simple means more participation. That being said, other participants mentioned that the current system forces voters to cast their ballot for a candidate that could be deemed not the best candidate for the riding in order to choose a certain party. A theoretical solution around this problem is to design a system in which voters may choose both a local candidate and a party, which brings to mind the Israeli example of electing separately the Knesset and the Prime Minister.

There was a general consensus that democratic legitimacy was strongly correlated with good representativeness of the legislature and that this fact should be reflected in any future electoral system. While it was acknowledged that no voting system is perfect, participants felt that any new voting system should be adapted so that representativeness should be tailored to the reality and challenges of Canadian demographics and territory. It is therefore doubtful that our current system can be considered very legitimate if we base legitimacy on the above criteria.

One participant brought forward the idea that the current system destroys the value of individual votes in so-called “castles ridings”. It was argued that individual votes in those ridings were nearly worthless against the predominant party in those types of ridings. This was made even worse by the abolition of per-vote subsidies by the former federal government in 2015. It was argued that the value of individual votes was linked to the existence of multiple viable choices available to individual voters in all ridings, whether through proportional or multi-seat constituencies.

However, while the voting process should be further legitimized by including smaller parties in the decision-making process, one caveat expressed by participants was the fact that FPTP often brings decisive majorities, which was highly valued and presented as a distinct advantage of the current system. A number of participants expressed the idea that coalitions make difficult policy-making decisions even harder, watering down platforms in order to attain a compromise with smaller coalition partners. The present system limits the number of political parties that have access to power basically to one per election cycle. On the other hand, a political system like the one implemented in Israel, a pure

proportional representation where a multitude of parties form unstable coalitions, was rejected by the participants.

During the presentation of the proportional voting system, someone was wondering what would happen if a party would obtain more votes than the number of official candidates needed to represent the electoral outcome. Under FPTP, federal parties are not required to present candidates in all ridings in order for the party to be recognized as eligible. The President commented that Election Canada statutes concerning the eligibility of federal political parties in Canada would surely need to be modified in order to accommodate the new voting system, presenting election thresholds in countries having adopted a proportional voting system as an example.

Therefore, the fundamental problem raised in our Town Hall Meeting, a problem that must be addressed in any electoral reform process, is how to balance the idea of including small parties in the decision-making process in order to obtain elected governments that legitimately represent Canadian values and diversity without forming unstable coalition governments.

Finally, we do not have to reinvent the wheel in order to change the system. We simply have to see what other countries are doing with their electoral system and test different solutions before adopting a final solution. Therefore, rather than having a referendum on electoral reform to choose whether we change the system or not, we should wait a number of years after the new voting system is implemented before having a referendum to decide if we keep this new system or go back to FPTP.

Beyond Electoral Reform

The idea of having parity between men and women was discussed, but competence was deemed more important than achieving gender parity. Gender equality should not be imposed and candidates that represent minorities should never be token candidates, but really competent persons.

It was stressed that efforts must be made in order to promote and encourage candidates from minority communities, such as First Nations and LGBT+ candidates. Fear of such candidates being presented as token candidates to reach quotas was widely expressed, therefore efforts must be made to select and promote very qualified candidates amongst Canada's varied communities. One solution, mentioned along restoring public per-vote subsidies to federal political parties, is to provide financial incentives to political parties that increase in value with the number of minority candidates that they get elected.

A consensus was reached that voters should ideally cast their ballots for a political program, not for a candidate and, therefore, the electoral system should ultimately reflect that reality. The participants also agreed with the idea that citizens should not have to pay in order to join a party, they should be able to choose their candidates freely without intervention from the party. Party lists, in proportional systems, should be selected by party members, not imposed from the top.

Going even further, the possibility was raised not only for party members, but for riding electors themselves to be allowed input in the choice of local candidates they would prefer on the ballot for each party. This would allow voters to choose more accurately what they really want, but other participants mentioned that could create problems when it comes to building a strong team. How do we increase citizen participation by allowing them to choose their candidates? It was also noted that some candidates were chosen for their competence and others for their charisma and that both qualities had their place in the choice of candidates.

Furthermore, concerns were raised with the fact that campaigns are often very expensive for would-be candidates that are competent but come from less wealthy backgrounds. Thus a proposal was made that an independent public fund could be set up to help potential candidates to fund their candidacy expenditures. Making voting mandatory was rejected by a wide majority of participants without much discussion. The only question that arose was which kind of penalty such offenders would risk by not casting their vote (in Australia they are fined). It is interesting to note that some attendees said that not casting a vote should be counted as a vote against the system or the choice of candidates.

Reception was mixed on electronic voting. There were numerous concerns that voting online would present significant security issues. Thus it was proposed that a back-up paper trail of the votes cast should always be maintained, even if the vote is electronic, in order to protect the system against technical problems and fraud.

That said, participants were much more open to the use of electronic means in order to help rebuild the confidence of voters in the voting system. Participants were thus open to use applications (ex. iPad Apps) to decrease time for checking voters during the election process or to find technological solutions to make it easier for handicapped or visually-impaired citizens to vote. Finally, the idea of using biometrics to identify voters (like those wishing to remain veiled for religious reasons) through iris-recognition technology was welcomed favourably but some concerns were raised as to whether it would be voluntary or not.

Improving our democracy

When brought to the floor, the topic of direct democracy (be it through citizen activism or recall processes) was received with mixed feelings, participants preferring instead the idea that parliamentary consensus represents most accurately the people's will. Direct democracy requires a very informed electorate. Furthermore, it was said that it could be dangerous since it prevents unpopular decisions from being enacted from fear of being recalled or punished through direct democracy mechanisms.

One participant said that we already had some form of direct democracy available through the use of petitions. Someone proposed the idea that petitions attaining a certain threshold should require an official answer from the government. It was also argued that citizens should feel safe in expressing their opinions, raising issues and policy ideas without any fear of retribution.

Participants said that MPs should report to their constituents in non-partisan Town Hall Meetings, a form of direct democracy, on a regular basis. In that way, people would be well informed and learn not to be afraid of voicing their own opinions.

Citizens should receive a pamphlet or e-pamphlet every 3 months which impartially details, thus without partisan vocabulary, what actions their Member of Parliament has undertaken in the House of Commons and how involved they are with their own constituents.

The government must take steps to educate its citizens about the nature of the electoral process. These courses should be widely available by, for example, giving Election Canada the mandate to hold public consultations on a regular basis and to provide civic courses in public places, schools and universities.

In the same vein, another suggestion was to make this mission part of Service Canada's mandate, in close cooperation with Election Canada, in order to use Service Canada's local facilities to run micro-programs informing citizens about the electoral system and process. Unemployed people could be given an incentive to volunteer in helping both Service Canada and Election Canada with educating citizens, in exchange of incentives linked with their employment insurance benefits. However, measures should be taken to ensure that Service Canada remains totally impartial and non-partisan and not the official mouthpiece of any party currently in power.

Finally, the internet and new social media technologies should be used as much as possible in order to multiply outlets through which citizens may follow the workings of the House of Commons, not only during Question Period, but also during hearings of House and Senate Committees. Furthermore, an idea was expressed that Radio-Canada, being the national public broadcaster, should replace CPAC as the main broadcaster of House Sessions and that it should also broadcast the Question Period during normal waking hours.