

Special Committee on Electoral Reform
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada
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Dear Committee Members:

My interest in electoral reform grew while I gathered close to 1000 signatures for Adriane Carr's **Citizen's Initiative to Reform our (BC's) Electoral System** to change to a Mixed Member Proportional system in the spring and summer of 2002. What an exciting process! What a promising prospect! Over the 90 days allotted for gathering signatures, I averaged 15 minutes with each person who signed the Initiative. As the weeks wore on, more and more people heard about the initiative and grew keener and keener with the possibility of change. Really! We can change this! We must! It was this Citizen's Initiative that truly put the prospect of Electoral Reform on BC's radar, making it a known quantity when Gordon Campbell decided to hold a Citizens' Assembly. I also attended virtually all the Citizen Assembly sessions at the Wosk Center in Vancouver throughout 2004 (following the early processes from August 2003 when Stage one began with 15,800 invitations mailed to randomly identified British Columbians, through the Stage three Selection process that ended in December 2003 resulting in 160 Assembly participants.)

We in BC have learned a great deal about why BC and now Canada should change its electoral system. There is no need to start from scratch and reinvent the wheel — you can continue from where we left off. And most important, there's definitely no need to repeat the pitfalls we sank ourselves into.

Of pitfalls, the greatest is not having an educated public. You can spend all the money you like, complete an excellent process like a Citizens Assembly, hold an abundance of town hall meetings, have the press on side to a point, but if there is no massive dedicated outreach whereby every voter grasps what is at stake and the alternatives for achieving a distinctly better choice, the baby will yet again be thrown out with the bath water.

As much as I believe any proportional electoral system would advance the following principle, the government itself is responsible for educating citizens to advance this very principle:

Engagement: that the proposed measure (electoral possibilities) would encourage voting and participation in the democratic process, foster greater civility and collaboration in politics, enhance social cohesion and offer opportunities for inclusion of underrepresented groups in the political process;

For the present process, I attended my MP's town hall in North Vancouver, and the downtown Vancouver session of the Committee on Electoral Reform. While I understand that (a) these events were basically information-gathering sessions *for the presenters*, and also (b) the majority of the audience in both cases consisted of well-informed citizens with significant understanding of electoral system options, on the other hand, any citizen who attended either event to learn about electoral reform received barely more than a graphic on the options. Indeed, in one group discussion, several citizens were dismayed at the lack of introductory material to explain anything

at all about electoral systems. I believe the professor who made a stab at an overview of electoral systems in a chart in approximately twenty minutes at Jonathan Wilkinson's town hall barely had a grasp of what citizens needed to know.

Education is essential: an informed, engaged public is the heart of a healthy democracy. This topic must be put on the national public radar in an exceptionally engaging way such that all citizens naturally strive to understand the basic differences of electoral options and become clear on the relative merits of each, if only in this case to be a part of the process the federal government and its MPs are now contending with. Elections Canada, the CBC, Rick Mercer and a few inventive minds can surely tap into citizens' concern for their democracy *in a big way*.

It's so difficult to think outside the box. Could broad public support be engaged through a CONTEST, such as CBC ran on **The Greatest Canadian** that had huge public participation from April through November 2004. Part of a contest could be voting on the best explanation / presentation of each voting system submitted by a high school student (with voting via each system). Getting outside the box! It needn't cost millions! It costs imagination!

During the countdown to the 2005 BC Election and referendum on STV, the Socials department in the secondary school where I was teaching engaged all the Grade 11 classes in an activity that had the students vote using STV and calculate the vote (with numbers of students representing numbers of votes, out on the school's field). Miraculously, the students gleaned a far better understanding of this system than did most of the public despite many explanations, animations and all. Transcending the confusion these systems involve is possible but challenging.

If Canadians become clear on the solid reasons for the now many initiatives to CHANGE our electoral system, it naturally follows they will comprehend the key merits of the several choices. The BC population had the advantage of first grasping the advantages of Mixed Member Proportional Representation during Adriane Carr's Citizens' Initiative. It was only much later, almost as a surprise at the end of the Citizens' Assembly, that they were confronted with the complexities of STV. It was here we bogged down. When it came to the second referendum, STV was not well understood.

If the present government wishes to be successful in the long term with the very expensive process underway, they will take the importance of an informed public into account in an exceptionally imaginative way and not present their decision on an electoral system change to an uncomprehending public. Even if a better electoral system will eventually "encourage voting and participation in the democratic process, foster greater civility and collaboration in politics", it is not entirely up to the electoral system to accomplish that.

I commend the committee for the extensive research and collaboration they have undertaken both with the public and among political parties in Parliament. I fully trust that your deliberations will boil down to pivotal considerations of what will best suit Canada's particular rural/urban circumstances that indeed present a very real challenge. We may each have our preferences for a particular system, but only a true team exploring all aspects of a potential best choice can come to a consensus regarding what will best suit all of Canada.

Respectfully,

Sabra Woodworth
North Vancouver