

**BRIEF SUBMITTED TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS  
SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM**

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Since Confederation in Canada, we have been using the first past the post voting system to elect our representatives in the House of Commons.

The system worked well for a certain period of time given that the choice of voters was reduced to only two political parties. In the 1930s, with the emergence of a third party, we began to notice the disadvantages of such a system. The situation worsened after World War II and in the 1960s criticism for the first past the post voting system began to multiply. Even the government became aware of the problem and the topic was addressed by several commissions in the years 1979, 1985 and 1989. Several recommendations were made without any government choosing to take action, with the exception of a vague promise made by P.E. Trudeau in the 1980s to create a parliamentary committee to examine the problem. The idea was eventually abandoned since the parties could not agree on a mandate for the committee.

Several debates on the electoral voting system were held at the provincial level, but no changes were made.

For those who have had the curiosity to go through the documents and exchanges that occurred in the debates regarding changes to the current system, one conclusion becomes clear: just as in the case of the Canadian health system, we know what the problems are, we have recommendations for how to improve things or to change the system, but there is no political will to make these changes a reality. Our elected MPs, once they ascend Parliament Hill in Ottawa (the equivalent of Greek Mount Olympus) transform themselves into gods (the PM and his ministers) or into demi-gods (the other MPs) and they take advantage of the system until the next election. See you later to the voters they are there to represent, hello party discipline, power and submission to the Leader so that he will sign their nomination papers for the next election.

The announcement that the new PM decided to keep his promise and make changes to the electoral system seems, at first glance, to be a step forward in resuscitating a democracy that has become more and more moribund. However, we should wait for the results before getting too excited.

In a representative democracy such as ours, the voting system plays an extremely important role without it being the only element that characterizes it. Over the last few decades, sometimes encouraged by our representatives, we have forgotten the importance of the other elements of democracy and we have contented ourselves with exercising our right to vote at fairly regular intervals.

It is not necessary to go over the description of the three major types of voting systems: first past the post, proportional and mixed. As professionals assigned to this committee, you are supposed to know them.

In my view, it would be more useful to make a few comments on the links between the voting system, the five principles stated in the Committee's mandate, and democracy.

It is obvious that the current voting system does not satisfy the principle of legitimacy and equality. The simple fact that a party can hold a majority in the House of Commons with a percentage of the vote that is lower than 50% and often below 40% is a serious infringement on democracy. **Parliamentary legitimacy stemming from a majority in the House is not the same thing as democratic legitimacy.**

Participation by the electorate in elections is in large part directly connected to the feeling that voters have that their vote counts, justifying their participation. However, in the current system, a large portion of voters see their votes as being useless because even if their political party receives tens, even hundreds, of thousands of votes, they are not represented in the House. There is therefore a need to introduce an element of proportionality that would allow for fairer representation.

One of the principles often mentioned involves diversity in the House, with women, minorities and Aboriginals being currently underrepresented. It seems naive to believe that the problem of diversity, essential in a democracy, can be resolved **solely** through a voting system. The choice of candidates is first and foremost a democratic issue within the political parties. Over the last few decades, even with our current voting system, the parties have diversified their choice of candidates, which is reflected in the current composition of the House, which is much more diversified than in the 1980s. **The parties therefore need to democratize their internal operations so that the chosen candidates can reflect the current socioeconomic and cultural composition of our society.**

Local representation is an important principle to most Canadians. **In a representative democracy, it is important that the voters be able to delegate their power to an individual from their community who knows the situation and local needs and who will act in the common interest. Here again, the voting system is important, but more importantly still, there must be a change in the mentality of the political parties in which the representatives of the people must first and foremost serve the interests of the party.** We are currently witnessing a major hijacking of the political process.

It is important to remember that the voting system is only one element among many others that compose a democracy. For years, we have tried to reduce democracy to the exercising of the right to vote. Once the election is over, the gods and demi-gods govern the country as they please for the next four years.

Over the last few years, we have witnessed a degradation of the democratic institutions essential to democracy. How can we ask the general population to respect Parliament when those who were selected by the voters behave in such an undemocratic fashion in the House? How can we ask people to respect the justice system and the independence of the Supreme Court when our representatives attack the decisions rendered by the Supreme Court and denigrate its members? Or again, how can we ask people to respect the Law when our representatives enact laws that violate the Canadian Constitution and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms?

**It is therefore obvious that a change in voting system could in fact improve democratic life in Canada, but such a change is not a universal panacea that will cure our democracy.**

The current political system is centred on the political parties and their leaders, therefore on the interests of the parties. We can add to that the interests of pressure groups including the powerful lobbies that represent private interests.

**In a true democracy, the political system must be centred on the people, the true holders of power, and the common interest.**

In light of all the considerations mentioned, the Canadian electoral culture as well as the principles stated in the Committee's mandate, I propose that the Committee recommend **a mixed electoral system that, while keeping local representation, results in a proportionality that satisfies the principles mentioned in the mandate. The more democratic of the two variants is mixed member proportional representation which has the benefit of being able to deal with a possible disproportional distribution of seats.** It is currently being used in Germany, New Zealand, Italy, Scotland, etc.

This voting system provides proportional results while maintaining local representation. It also enables small parties and Aboriginals to be represented in the House.

The mandate also asks the Committee to examine and issue recommendations regarding two other aspects: mandatory voting and online voting.

**Given that in a democracy, citizens not only have rights but obligations as well, it seems completely normal to me that voting should be mandatory.**

**As for online voting, it should only be implemented once there is certainty that it is a secure system.**

In conclusion, I want to remind the members of the Committee that they are there to represent the voters, the true holders of power, and not the party to which they belong. Under this principle, they must act in the common interest and not in the interest of their party. As for the members of the party in power, they must remember that parliamentary

legitimacy is not the same thing as democratic legitimacy and that all changes to the voting system imposed under a parliamentary majority are undemocratic.