

Memorandum to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform
Consultation Report – Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform
Organized by the Association libérale fédérale de Longueuil–Saint-Hubert
September 8, 2016

1. Activity description

The Association libérale fédérale de Longueuil–Saint-Hubert held a community dialogue at 7 p.m. on September 8, 2016, at 911 Rolland-Therrien Blvd. in Longueuil. The meeting was facilitated by an independent moderator. There were 30 to 40 participants in attendance.

Three presentations were given to position the discussion:

- Sherry Romanado, MP for Longueuil–Charles-Lemoyne and member of the House of Commons Special Committee, spoke about her involvement in the Committee;
- Sylvie Cantin, the person responsible for policy for the Association libérale fédérale de Longueuil–Saint-Hubert, presented the various voting methods proposed by the government;
- Michel Venne, founder and Director General of the Institut du Nouveau Monde (INM), who has been working actively for many years to encourage citizen participation in political life, particularly youth participation, explained the positions of the INM in this regard.

Four discussion blocks in small groups followed the four voting methods proposed in the government consultation document:

1. Current system (plurality, or first-past-the-post)
2. Majority system – Preferential voting
3. Proportional representation
4. Mixed system

For each discussion block, the discussion was based on the following questions, which are directly related the governing principles of the reform.

How the system

- takes into account the democratic wishes of Canadians
- encourages Canadians to take an interest in democratic life
- fosters understanding and the inclusion of all Canadians
- encourages a connection between elected representatives and citizens
- gives Canadians confidence in election results

After each discussion block, the ideas were shared with the entire room. Participants expressed their preference individually on two occasions during the meeting: before and after the group discussions.

2. Dialogue results

General conclusion

Citizens generally know little about the shortcomings of the current system and alternative voting methods. Citizens need to be informed about this issue and, in particular, youth education must include training on our political system.

There were a wide range of perspectives concerning the various voting methods. Each has its benefits and drawbacks. And each was the system favoured by part of the participants with a slight preference for a mixed system that includes a component of the current system and a proportional component.

Several concerns were expressed regarding mandatory voting, voting at age 16, and electronic voting. Few participants supported these initiatives.

Summary by voting system

Current system

Among the advantages of the current system, the participants noted that it prevents the rise of extremist parties; that it affords a certain stability; and that they appreciate the relationship with the MP.

The participants realize that the system has shortcomings: the nuances brought by small parties are not reflected; there is low voting participation; and the fact that there are several parties is an issue that makes it difficult for a candidate to obtain a majority.

Political party financing is an issue. A number of people want to see public financing become a priority again (e.g., \$1 per vote).

The current system is hard for immigrants to understand.

Majority system – Preferential voting

Many participants liked preferential voting even if few advantages were noted. Some people found that it is better than the current system because each vote counts.

There were a number of different concerns: the system would not increase voter participation; it would favour centre parties as the second choice; there would still be distortions and differences between the percentages of first choices by citizens and the percentages of

MPs; the winner may be the first choice of few people; and this may create different classes of elected representatives based on the proportions they obtained.

A certain number of participants preferred two-round voting.

Proportional representation

The benefits of proportional representation are its simplicity and that it imposes inclusion and representativeness among the candidates and in Parliament.

Certain people preferred closed lists and that the parties select the candidates.

Among the concerns, people noted that it would lead to minority or coalition governments, that there would be more uncertainty and a lack of transparency. In Parliament there would be better representation but the population would not have access to behind-the-scenes manoeuvring and many had fears.

Some also pointed out that with larger ridings (with several MPs), there would be less direct contact between elected representatives and citizens.

Mixed system

The mixed system was viewed by many as a good compromise.

One concern is that there would be two classes of MPs: those elected and those appointed by the parties. One interesting suggestion was mentioned. Instead of the parties defining the list of candidates for the proportional component, it could be the candidates defeated in the first-past-the-post (FPTP) component who form these lists with, as a priority, those who obtained the most votes.

Mandatory voting

A majority was against mandatory voting. One concern was that it infringes on individual freedom. The participants prefer that we focus on raising public awareness of the importance of voting and our duties as citizens.

Voting at age 16

A majority was against the right to vote at age 16. Those who supported it thought there should be sound education/training provided before this age. Many thought that at age 16, teenagers are not ready for this responsibility and some feared that the training provided

in a school environment may be biased. Some also thought there was a risk of having absurd promises to attract young people.

Online voting

As regards online voting, the points of view ranged considerably. About half was in favour because of the compilation benefits. Certain people suggested retaining paper evidence, at least in the beginning. The other half was against, especially because it is considered too risky—not enough assurance for the results and the threat to confidentiality.

Summary of individual preferences

During the meeting, we asked participants to note their individual preferences before and after the dialogue. Below is the table of results.

Topic	Before the dialogue	After the dialogue
Current system (plurality, or	5	6
Preferential voting	8	6
Proportional system	5	4
Mixed system	7	9
Other	3	2

There is a slight change in the preferences for voting systems. The next system increased slightly in popularity while preferential voting declined slightly. In the end, the mixed system obtained the most votes but with a small margin.

Topic	Before the dialogue		After the dialogue	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Mandatory voting	9	14	7	20
Voting at age 16	9	14	8	17

As regards mandatory voting and voting at age 16, in both cases, there were more people against these after the dialogue.

3. Recommendations

Here we present the recommendations of the Association libérale fédérale de Longueuil–Saint-Hubert further to the Citizens' Assembly. These recommendations were not discussed at the meeting, but are the fruit of our reflection after the event.

1. We are concerned about citizens' lack of knowledge about the current system and on politics in general. We recommend that the government look into this issue because it is the basis for being able to change the system.
2. The stability of the electoral system is important to citizens. Citizens want a transition that ensures stability. We believe that citizens are ready to accept a delay in the promise to change the electoral system for the 2019 election until the 2024 election. We recommend that the government proceed without haste. Further, we recommend that enough time be allocated to properly inform citizens about the new system before it is implemented.
3. This consultation focused on the governing principles and outlines of potential systems. We recommend that dialogue be encouraged at the various steps of the change. In particular, we recommend that dialogues be held on the specific system that the Committee will recommend in order to influence the bill.
4. We observe that the political culture in Canada and exchanges among MPs are based largely on opposition and confrontation. The Liberal government has initiated a change in culture to move toward a culture of cooperation and collaboration. We believe that this change in culture is essential for implementing effective electoral reform. However, a change in culture is much more difficult and takes much longer than just changing the system. In the case of electoral reform, we recommend that the scope of the change in culture among MPs, citizens, stakeholders and the media be recognized and that measures be taken to implement an effective reform in the context of a change in culture.