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Chair

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia

Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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● (1400)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting 21 of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform. We're in our afternoon session.

We have with us Dr. Richard Johnston of the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia; Mr. Darrell Bricker from IPSOS Public Affairs; and Mr. Gordon Gibson, who is known to many, of course, through his writings and commentary.

[*Translation*]

Allow me to first provide you with a short biography for each of the witnesses appearing before you today.

[*English*]

Richard Johnston is a professor of political science at the University of British Columbia as well as the Canada Research Chair in Public Opinion, Elections, and Representation. Dr. Johnston is also a Marie Curie research fellow at the European University Institute in Florence, where he is the visiting scientist in a venture seeking to train young scholars on the matters of elections and democracy. He is currently also the director of the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions. Dr. Johnston was principal investigator of the 1988 and 1992-93 Canadian election surveys, and was a consultant for the 1996 New Zealand election study. He served as advisory board member for the 2001, 2005, and 2009 British election studies, and was a member of the planning committee for the United States national election study pilot in 1998. Dr. Johnston is widely published, and has won four American Political Science Association awards and four book prizes.

Welcome, Dr. Johnston. We're very pleased you're with us today.

[*Translation*]

Darrell Bricker is the CEO of IPSOS Public Affairs. In 1989, he worked in Prime Minister Mulroney's office as director of public opinion research. Mr. Bricker has a Ph.D. from Carleton University and an honorary doctorate of laws from Wilfrid Laurier University.

Mr. Bricker published a long list of academic papers and works. He writes editorials for the *National Post* and *The Globe and Mail* regularly. In 2010, Mr. Bricker was appointed honorary colonel by the national defence minister for his contributions to Canada. He is currently a member on the board of the Laurier Institute for the study of public opinion and policy. He is also a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research.

[*English*]

Welcome, Mr. Bricker.

Gordon Gibson is a politician, political columnist, and author. He has a B.A. from the University of British Columbia and an M.B.A. from Harvard University. Mr. Gibson served as assistant to the federal minister of northern affairs from 1963 to 1968 and as special assistant to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau from 1968 to 1972, in addition to serving in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia in the 1970s and 1980s. Since 1993 he has been a senior fellow in Canadian studies at the Fraser Institute, and has written many books on Canadian federalism and governance. In 2001 he was asked by the Government of British Columbia to provide recommendations on the structure and mandate of a citizens' assembly on electoral reform, which so far we've talked about often at this committee. These recommendations were later adopted. In 2008 Mr. Gibson was awarded the Order of British Columbia.

I believe each presenter will be presenting for 10 minutes. Then we'll have two rounds of questions, where each member of the committee gets to ask questions and receive answers for five minutes each. We will just repeat that format for the second round.

Without further ado, I will ask Professor Johnston to share with us his thoughts on electoral reform.

● (1405)

Professor Richard Johnston (Professor, Department of Political Science, University of British Colombia, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll open by saying that some of the information you gave is as out of date as the photograph on my web page.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Prof. Richard Johnston: I regret the latter more than the former.

I just want to make four big points, drawn from the five-page statement I sent last week. One is that I find it distressing that so much of the commentary on electoral reform represents the House as if it's a species of the U.S. Congress or some entity that is part of a congressional framework and not the constitutive chamber for the government, which inevitably it is in a parliamentary system. Voters care about this. They care about this as much under PR as they do under majority rule, because PR will almost always, at least the relevant examples, accompany parliamentary systems. Even under PR, considerations about the formation of the government induce strategic voting. You've probably heard about strategic voting induced by thresholds and that sort of thing.

Even apart from thresholds, many voters actually care about the likely composition of the government once the returns are in. There's some evidence to suggest, for example, that voters on the flanks, or voters on the near flanks, vote for more extreme parties than they themselves prefer in order to pull the government toward them, so to speak. The general point is that you can't isolate the voting moment from the government formation moment. I would say there's been a sort of intellectually lazy separation of those two in much of what's been said here.

The second point, and maybe the one I care the most about at the moment, is that I'm struck that so often wholesale packages are put on the table, and then virtues are claimed for them or vices imputed to them. I think it's absolutely important to remember that any electoral system is actually at a minimum—there are other pieces as well, but at a minimum—a compound of three things. The interaction amongst the three is absolutely necessary to get a grip on what is the likely product of a change in that direction.

First of all, you have to have a ballot. The most important though not the only distinction is whether it's a categorical or a preferential ballot.

Second, the whole question of district magnitude, the number of seats per district, is absolutely a critical element. You can't have proportional representation, obviously, if you have single-member districts. If you have multiple-member districts with a plurality formula, you have grossly disproportional results. Nonetheless, the magnitude of the district is important to a lot of things, not least to the proportionality of a proportional framework.

The third question is the formula itself, where the formula is crystal clear in the case of the plurality rule; semi-clear in the case of the majority, which has kind of two operable forms; and then there's the family, among whom the differences are very consequential for proportional representation. In many cases, effects that are attributed, say, to the formula are actually the product of another feature of the system. It may be that it's a feature of the system that is only relevant under a proportional formula, but it's not the formula as such that's critical.

Let me give you an example. It is generally true, as you've heard, that descriptive representation of females is higher on average in PR systems, but we also observe that there's massive variation within the PR family. It's also within the more majoritarian families, but there's particularly massive variation within the PR family. Some of that variation actually reflects the ballot. If you want to maximize the descriptive representation of any group, women or otherwise, in some sort of guaranteed fashion, it helps to have the largest district magnitude. The larger the number of seat per district, the easier it is to mix up demographic characteristics in the menu that a party presents.

Most importantly, you want to have a ballot that has a closed list, that has a categorical vote, one only per voter. Additionally, outside the electoral formula itself, you want to have a centralized placement of names on the ballot. If you yield to the temptation of derogating from any of those things, you will not have as powerful a mechanism for creating the prospect for guaranteed representation of categoric groups. On the other hand, if what you want to do is facilitate the representation by women or by other groups of forces that in some sense are not incorporated into the central conflict among the parties, you actually want the opposite of all of those things. The general point is that the ballot is often as important as the general formula for the achievement of certain political or social goals.

● (1410)

My third point is that most electoral system change, although New Zealand would be an exception, and possibly Germany, because it was kind of tabula rasa at the time and has a history of partisan objective, either to advance the interests of a party or to retard the interests of another. I think we need to be clear about that. To be silent on that I think is...well, it's dishonest, frankly. It is clear, for one thing, that proportional formulas in general empower the left relative to the right, and the opposite is true for majoritarian formulas. It's just the way it works. If you average across all the consolidated polities postwar, it's really a remarkably stark difference.

Second, a question that will always be in play in a place like Canada is which form of formula, majoritarian versus plurality, politicizes ethnic questions the most? It's actually not a simple answer. It is true that under PR you facilitate the coming into existence of micro-parties, which can be ethnic or otherwise but certainly can be ethnic. That's on the one hand. On the other hand, you do not augment the power of groups that are appealed to by those parties. It is easier for parties with a more national appeal to penetrate into those communities and in some sense dissolve the singular claim of a particular party to speak for them.

On the other hand, or actually a variation on the same theme, our system does create certain privileged, geographically related possibilities. The ancient and most important one in Canada is that until 1993, at least, it made Quebec the pivot for government. By augmenting the power of whatever majority was prevailing in the province at the time, and a whole other set of considerations about whether...but it made Quebec the pivot for government. It has since not been the pivot for government in the same way, but in some sense the pivotal task has been handed over to suburban Vancouver and suburban Toronto.

Those are all good-news, bad-news stories, but we should recognize that geographically differentiated groups, and this often includes ethnolinguistic groups, can actually have their power augmented in the formula we have now. That could be either the price of Canadian unity or the price of successful incorporation of groups, but it does produce a situation in which some votes count more than others. Those counts can help ethnic minorities.

My final few thoughts are about transition, if there is to be one. I am neither in favour of nor opposed to a referendum. I don't think they are to be absolutely abhorred or to be required. The issue I would care about, frankly, is the institutional stability of whatever framework you put in place. If you're going to change the electoral system, don't do it in a way that merely invites a change back or a change to something else in short order. I just think that's corrosive to the legitimacy of government and it's corrosive to the operation of political parties. The countries that do that, and there are a few, Italy and France being prime examples, I think have paid for that.

I think stability is key. To that end, the referendum could be a contribution to stability in the sense that it has a kind of morally binding force from the population at large. I'd invite you to consider whether some of the purposes of a referendum could be achieved by other means. Part of why a referendum appeals to people is that in some sense it takes if not the final choice out of your hands, then in some sense it raises the costs to you and limits your freedom of action in making the ultimate choice. That could be done by ways other than a referendum—a citizens' assembly, expert group, or whatever.

I have a couple of things in mind. For example, for the politically very fraught task of closing military bases in the U.S., or passing highly divisive trade agreements, the U.S. Congress has a route in which they basically invite outsiders to make the proposal and Congress decides up or down. In a manner of speaking, that's a bit like changing electoral boundaries in this country.

The general point is that to the extent that all politicians, rightly or wrongly, are perceived as in the business of self-dealing and self-interested action, you might want to think about, if you're really serious about change, executing the change in a way in which there is an independent voice that nonetheless has to come back and talk to you.

● (1415)

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Professor.

We'll move on to Dr. Darrell Bricker, please.

Mr. Darrell Bricker (CEO, IPSOS Public Affairs, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair, committee members, for the opportunity to appear today.

It's an important topic that obviously has major implications for Canada's democracy, and I'm honoured that I'm being asked to share some input with you today.

I do not claim to be an expert on election systems. My professional background, as you've heard from my CV, is in public opinion research. I, and my colleagues at IPSOS, conduct regular scientific surveys of Canadians on a wide variety of topics, including elections at all levels of government. Also, as the CEO of IPSOS Public Affairs worldwide, I'm conducting election surveys all over the world in many of the countries that you're probably interested in or have even studied. We've done a lot of research on all those places and I'd be pleased to entertain any questions you have about how the elections work there.

I should also say that IPSOS is a non-partisan research agency. The work that we do is for the media. We don't work on behalf of parties, and we don't work on behalf of candidates.

It should come as no surprise, then, that in order to prepare for today I conducted a survey for your consideration. I would like to use my time to share the results from the survey with you. I conducted it last week—IPSOS Public Affairs did—online with 1,000 Canadians, the way we typically do a political survey in Canada. We probed the following topics: awareness and interest in the electoral reform consultations process; how major changes to our electoral system should be approved according to Canadians; and whether public engagement and parliamentary review are enough, or whether there need to be a national referendum to settle the issue.

In order to get people kicked off in the correct frame of mind and give them some sense of what we were going to ask about, we read the following preamble to them:

> One of the commitments that Prime Minister Trudeau and the Liberals made during last October's federal election was that, if elected, they would make fundamental changes to Canada's election system. These changes could involve everything from replacing the first-past-the-post system, requiring mandatory voting and online voting. We'd like to ask you a few questions on these issues.

In other words, we reminded people that this wasn't just something that came out of the blue. It was something that the now-governing party had run on, and that there was a committee that was actually reviewing these specific topics. I took part of the question from the mandate that you're currently undertaking—at least what I received in terms of what was being studied.

The first question was: “Has the federal government started a process of public and parliamentary consultations on proposed changes to our election system?” In other words, who's watching us today?

Some 19% of Canadians said yes; 21% said no; 60% said they didn't know. In other words, a combined 81% thought consultations hadn't started yet, or were unsure. Only about one in five said that they believed this had happened, that something was going on.

Then what we did was we followed up with that 19% who said, hey, I know this is going on, and we asked them a question that you would ask them, which was: how closely are you following the consultations?

Of those who were aware that it's actually happening, 16%, or 30 people in 1,000, said that they were following the consultations very closely. Another 68%, or 129 people, said, a bit here and there, and 16%, or 31 of the people who we interviewed, said, not at all. Those most likely to be following the process were older, more educated, more affluent, men.

Therefore, the audience closely following this process today is about 3% of Canadians, and it's an elite group. In my experience, this shouldn't be a surprise. While major electoral reform impacts everyone, people are busy and are living their day-to-day lives—look at the time of year that we're in right now—and it's very tough to get their attention on these types of public issues. When they do pay attention to anything that's happening in Ottawa, it's to issues that are much higher priority to them personally, such as health care, jobs, and the economy. This is a consistent finding in any survey about Canada's national agenda, regardless of who takes it.

Next, we asked about consultations versus a national referendum. I used a question that another firm had asked, because it had shown that there was some division on this point, and I thought it was a good question. So I asked that question: "Some people say that any change to the electoral system is so fundamental that it would require a national referendum. Others say that a rigorous program of public engagement and parliamentary review should be sufficient. Which statement is closest to your point of view?"

Some 49% said a referendum was necessary; 51% said consultations should be enough.

● (1420)

Then I followed with a similar question, but I reminded people that consultations were actually taking place: "In your view, is the process of public engagement and parliamentary review now being undertaken by the federal government sufficient to give them public consent to fundamentally change our federal election system without a national referendum, or, do you want them to seek public consent for the changes they come up with through a national referendum?"

To this question, "consultations are sufficient" dropped by six percentage points to 45%, and "national referendum" increased by six percentage points to 55%. What this suggests to me is that the more people know about this, the more they actually want to have a direct say themselves.

A majority in every demographic category we looked at supported a referendum—by gender, age, education level, income, and whether or not you had kids in your house. A majority of the people who had kids in their house—or didn't have kids in their house—also supported having a referendum. The single exception to this was the province of Quebec, where only 47% supported a national referendum. I guess they have a bit more experience with the process of a referendum than other Canadians do.

To sum up, in spite of the importance of this issue, an elite audience of about 3% of Canadians could be described as engaged with this process at the moment. As a result, it shouldn't come as a surprise that a majority of Canadians across all segments of the population want to be directly consulted on major changes to the electoral system by some form of a national referendum.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Bricker, for bringing these fresh results to our attention.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: It's what I do.

The Chair: It is appreciated.

We will now go to Mr. Gibson.

Mr. Gordon Gibson (As an Individual): Thank you for this opportunity, Mr. Chairman.

Except for two brief opening comments, my thoughts will be on process rather than electoral systems, of which you've already heard much. My main addition to the mixed advice of the experts is to make the obvious point that the various electoral systems cannot be considered in the abstract, however elegant they may be.

We are a sprawling and highly urbanized federation with our own makeup and history, and our own political culture.

Also, and this is cautionary, changes to any political system with great complexities and feedback loops will bring unintended consequences sooner or later. For example, on the "sooner" side, in 1952, in my province, the disintegrating Liberal and Conservative coalition introduced a form of the alternative ballot, a scheme that the press claims is the preferred Liberal alternative. The aim was to keep the NDP, then called the CCF, out of power on the theory that the free enterprise voters would make one or the other of the two old parties their first and second choice. Result? Out of nowhere, a Social Credit government ruled B.C. for 20 years. You can't tell how even small changes will play out.

As a second brief example, who would have dreamed that what seemed like small changes to the U.S. primary system many years ago would lead to Donald Trump today?

Unintended consequences lurk in constitutional change, and that's the kind of change I say we're talking about.

Now, to my two main arguments. The first is that the electoral system belongs uniquely to the people, not to politicians, and citizens must be directly involved in any change.

You will probably require a supporting argument for my proposition that Parliament can't act alone, because in the British tradition, Parliament has always been supreme.

In Canada, from the beginning, Parliament and the legislatures faced constraints. Some of them were explicit in the British North America Act and some implied from the preamble's wording, “similar in principle” to the United Kingdom, which imported certain conventions, and so on. The power of Parliament to act was subsequently dramatically constrained, and those of the Supreme Court dramatically extended, by the 1982 constitutional amendments, including but not limited to the charter. In 2007 the same court developed a doctrine further constraining Parliament by incorporating ratified international human rights documents into our law. In 2014 came an even more relevant decision on the Senate.

In the circumstances of today, the law of today, I wish to pose three questions. One, can the Parliament of Canada unilaterally change the electoral system of the House of Commons in law? Two, if such a change were lawful, would it be morally proper? Three, if the answers to the first and second questions are yes, would it be politically wise?

Would such a change be lawful? No one can answer this question, including the government's lawyers, except the Supreme Court, which will certainly be asked if change is proposed. We do have a bit to go by, coming from the Senate reference of 2014. In that decision, the court substantially widened its powers of review of these matters, and I quote:

> The Constitution should not be viewed as a mere collection of discrete textual provisions. It has an architecture, a basic structure. By extension, amendments to the Constitution are not confined to textual changes. They include changes to the Constitution’s architecture that modify the meaning of the constitutional text.

No one in this room needs to be told that since 1982 the Supreme Court can do anything it wants to do, especially in cases like this where the notwithstanding clause would not even apply in theory. These words must be taken seriously. What might they mean in this context?

The simplest example is federative in nature. The province of Quebec—and Professor Johnston adverted to this—could well argue that throughout our history, FPTP has contributed mightily to a block vote of MPs from that province, which in turn has enhanced their power in the federation. Any change would affect the architecture of confederation, without question. I'd hate to argue the other side of that case.

A broader argument is that FPTP makes majority governments far more likely, which is an indisputable fact. The alternative vote is, perhaps, an exception. That might also be part of the essential constitutional architecture of the country. It has certainly mattered throughout our history.

The court would look at these things, but it could ignore such reasoning, it seems to me, if sufficiently persuasive third-party support were offered, such as provincial consent in certain numbers or a popular referendum.

● (1425)

Thus I say to the committee, if you want to avoid prolonged litigation on this matter—an unpleasant possibility—you might well be advised to make any proposed change judgment-proof by demonstrating such extra-parliamentary support.

To move to my second question, the propriety of unilateral change, the Canadian state does not belong to Parliament; the beneficial owners are the Canadian people. Elected representatives are in the nature of trustees—respected, very broad powers, but limited.

In our system, almost all our decisions are made by you as representatives, and we do not have a political culture that would make frequent use of referenda either practical, desirable, or popular. Most people have neither the time nor inclination to make the studies and trade-offs that you do on our behalf.

However, this deference has limits. When it comes to the rules of the game, the very basic law of how decisions are made, people want and deserve a voice. I very much respected the words of Mr. Bricker on this when he said that the more they know, they more they want to have a say.

You can be absolutely certain that if electoral reform becomes a likely matter, the people will know a very great deal about it. The Charlottetown accord referendum stands as a very powerful precedent, wherein a solid majority of Canadians rejected virtually the entire Canadian establishment. My province has had a law for 25 years requiring that any constitutional proposal has to pass a referendum test.

I know you've been told by some that constitutional referendums always fail. I'm here to tell you that's not true. New Zealand has been mentioned, but confining our attention only to Canada, just a bit over 10 years ago, a proposed new electoral system in B.C. received the affirmative support of almost 58% of the electorate. The turnout was 61.5%. The measure secured an absolute majority in 77 out of 79 ridings. That referendum passed by any reasonable test, but the provincial government had set a 60% hurdle rate, so a marvellous opportunity for a natural experiment in thoughtful electoral reform was lost.

The fact is, with a good proposal and adequate consultation, constitutional referenda cannot only be won, but in the doing—and this goes again to Richard's point—confer a massive legitimacy not otherwise attainable. Such legitimacy should be the gold standard for any proposed change in basic law.

Central to the B.C. success was the developmental and consultative machinery for the new electoral proposal. The Government of British Columbia, in common with Ontario and P. E.I. in similar circumstances, accepted that the electoral system was owned by the people and that change should be developed and affirmed by the people. The government therefore mandated a citizens' assembly and gave me the honour of designing the machinery. Through the efforts of the chair, the staff, and its members, it worked supremely well.

The bottom line is that at the end of the day the people believed in it because it was credible and empowered. I am convinced that with the appropriate changes, a similar process could work on the national level, and I'd be glad to give details if asked.

I now come to my final point. I've argued that unilateral change to our electoral system by Parliament might well not be lawful, and suggested how to make it so. I've argued that it would not be legitimate if unilateral, and have suggested machinery to address that need.

Now let me suggest that you may ignore the first two arguments, but then you will fall prey to a third factor: unilateral change would not be politically wise. You are current practitioners; I'm not. However, I've spent one-third of my working life in politics and another one-third commenting on their doings, so I don't feel backward about giving you a bit of political advice.

If this Parliament, and in particular the governing party, proceeds to enact electoral change without court or citizen validation, it would face a storm of criticism. The attack lines virtually write themselves: “The electoral system belongs to the people, not the politicians”, “Our employees should not hire themselves”, and so on. Were I still in politics, such a debate would be great fun, but I most earnestly counsel you to avoid such a fight for fear of diminishing the already too little trust in our system.

Some on the government benches will say, “But we promised the last election would be the last with FPTP.” So you did. Every party makes unwise promises. Every citizen understands that. The question then becomes, after the election, which are crucial in electoral terms and which are not? This one, I say, is not.

● (1430)

My advice is to report to the House that you were all agreed that after careful committee study, it's more important to take the time to do this right rather than be in a hurry to do it wrong. Trust the people in this. You'll not regret it.

Thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gibson.

We'll start the first round with Mr. DeCourcey, for five minutes, please.

Two of our witnesses have to leave at 4:30, so I might have to be a little less flexible when we reach the time limit than I may have been in the past.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey (Fredericton, Lib.): I don't believe I've ever gone over time.

The Chair: No, you haven't. This is not addressed to you in particular.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thank you. I'll continue to stand as the gold standard.

The Chair: Yes, you set the standard, Mr. DeCourcey.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: I want to start with Professor Johnston and, actually, the very first sentence in the brief that you delivered to us, which states: “Discussion of electoral reform too often concentrates on the total makeup of Parliament and speaks of the House as if it were a legislative body in a separated-powers system.”

You explained a little bit about what that might mean, but I wonder if you can perhaps offer some tangible or specific pieces of advice as to how that is being played out in this committee, and how we may be able to better structure the conversation when we head out across the country to engage Canadians.

Prof. Richard Johnston: Making these distinctions is often quite difficult, because particular behaviours by voters or by politicians frequently embody both elements. Other than in grand coalition situation, any government that is formed is going to be a partial selection from the entirety of the House. You want to ask yourself how representative the governments in question are of the totality of the House; or if not of the totality of the House, do they at least, as the saying goes, cover the median member of the House in terms of, say, a left/right or other distribution?

One of the peculiarities of Canada is that for much of its history, it's the only single-member district system in which much of the time the government has covered the median. The standard form of government under first past the post is a party that is off centre, which doesn't cover the centre, and is able to govern nonetheless. The critical check is that it is vulnerable to defeat. One hopes that down the road there will be a sufficient alternation to keeps the system on course. That's one thing.

The particular worry that is often expressed in relation to PR systems is that they often empower small minorities to be the pivot for coalition formation. That's terrific if there is a party that is itself of the centre, and in effect can be the pivot for government, helping perhaps along in alternation. That was the story in Germany, for example, until the nineties basically. The Free Democratic Party in particular, was in every German government. It typically had two of the most important ministries, foreign affairs and economics. Whether it was a Social Democratic or Christian Democratic chancellor, the FDP in some sense kept the ship of the German state, so to speak, on a kind of course. That's not true now. In fact, two of the last three elections have forced a grand coalition in Germany. That does make for a kind of consensus politics, but it produces a really unsatisfactory electoral situation when you have the debate between the chancellor and chancellor candidate of the other party and their cabinet colleagues.

● (1435)

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: A little further down in that opening paragraph, you talk about what I believe to be electors' view, whether a convention or not, that they are determining the legitimacy of who can govern as much they're deciding upon policy objectives. Do you think that this a value that is quite strongly represented through our current political culture? Is that something we want to be mindful of?

Prof. Richard Johnston: Yes, it is of value. Like all values, it is not absolute. The price of implementing that value can be too high. It is at least sometimes the case that the implementation of the value produces off-centre governments. But voters, including under PR systems, do value a say in the composition of governments. As it happens in many PR systems, electoral coalitions are struck in advance, and coalition agreements are, de facto, part of the package that people are voting on. Even where such agreements exist, or even where they don't exist, there is a slice of voters who see the vote as carrying strategic value vis-à-vis the composition of the government.

There's this kind of general point made by Matt Shugart, who's one of the leading students of this stuff, that what we have with first past the post, and to a certain extent with the majority formula, is in some sense an electoral framework that is maximally efficient. It's not perfect, but it's maximally efficient in realizing the directness of impact on the choice of government. But it does so at the price of representativeness, and in particular of the potential for a government that covers the median, so to speak.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Reid, go ahead.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): I want to start, if I could, with Dr. Bricker. Are the poll results you gave us orally today now posted on your website, or will they be shortly?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I hadn't thought about it. I thought they were just for you, but I can certainly do that.

Mr. Scott Reid: It is a televised meeting, so I guarantee they are not just for us anymore.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: They are out there.

Mr. Scott Reid: Maybe I could put it differently. I wonder if you have a copy of them.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I will send it to the clerk.

Mr. Scott Reid: That would be very much appreciated.

These results confirm something I have felt for some time. I have my own biases, but as I try to explain what is going on to people who aren't paying attention, they tend to become more firmly supportive of the position I hold, which is that there should be a referendum on whatever system goes forward at the end of this process.

However, your results differ somewhat from an earlier poll you did, which was released in late May, in which you asked people questions following this preamble:

> One of the commitments that Prime Minister Trudeau and the Liberals ran on during the election was that, if they were elected, they would make major changes to Canada's election system and how we elect Members of Parliament. Their commitment did not specify exactly how they would change the system. The following statements are about this commitment. For each, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree:

That is the preamble, and then people were asked to respond to the following statement:

> The Liberals should not make major changes to Canada's election system without holding a national referendum to get the public's approval for the changes

The combined “strongly agree” and “somewhat agreed” in favour of a referendum added up to over 70% of all respondents—

● (1440)

Mr. Darrell Bricker: It was 73%.

Mr. Scott Reid: —with only about 20% on the other side. What is the difference? What is the reason for the difference between the results in these two polls?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: We asked a different question. We gave them the option of having the process reviewed and approved in another way, so it was the parliamentary process—the committee process we are undertaking right now—versus a referendum, whereas in that particular instance, all we did was ask about a referendum. That leads me to believe that the more you talk about it, the more the number goes up.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I expect that the more people talk about this process and the more interested they become in it, the more you will see those numbers move up rather than down.

Mr. Scott Reid: One of the things that have been put.... I don't know if you have done this, but I follow all the polls on this subject.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I feel bad for you.

Mr. Scott Reid: Well, you have made the situation worse today, as a matter of fact, by adding another poll.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: You are welcome.

Mr. Scott Reid: I do follow these, and one of things one pollster has done is to include a preamble that, “Regardless of how you feel about electoral reform, do you favour a referendum?”

I am just wondering if there was anything in the results you got that indicated there is a distinction between those who are in favour of electoral reform not being in favour of a referendum, or if the results are more or less the same, regardless of people's ultimate personal desires as to what the outcome would be.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I always have trouble with a question that says, “I don't want you to think about how you yourself would think.” Who are they thinking about? Are they thinking about their neighbours, or whatever? It doesn't make a lot of sense to ask questions like that.

No, at this stage of the game, since we don't actually have any proposals on the table for people to consider, it is a little hard to ask them about that, although I did a survey in *Policy Options* a few years ago that asked people about PR, and the level of support for it was not very high. The reason is that the public doesn't necessarily see a huge problem with the way they elect parliamentarians. Their issue, when they have a lack of confidence in what goes on in Parliament, is with what parliamentarians do when they get here, not necessarily the process they go through to get elected.

It is no wonder that when we start talking to them about the process, to a certain extent they kind of think you are asking the wrong question.

Mr. Scott Reid: That is an interesting perspective.

I wanted to ask one other thing. The government has promised that it will have legislation, so we will actually know what its system is by April of next year, assuming it fulfills that promise and produces a proposed new electoral system. At that time, once Canadians get the chance to see which of the various options out there is the actual option, which necessarily means all the others are off the table, is that likely to change the percentage of those who feel that there ought to be a referendum? By definition, of course, people will be more informed then than they are now, but I am loading the question. Let me just ask you what—

The Chair: Answer briefly, please.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I will answer it in an unloaded way.

I would say that an awful lot depends on what this committee does. If this committee comes out and says that there is a consensus on how we should proceed, I think this is going to make a big difference in how Canadians would view the process of having a referendum or not.

If the committee comes out and says that this is very controversial, that people are disagreeing, and that there is no consensus on that point, I think this is when we get into what Professor Johnston and Gordon happened to say about the need for seeking external validation for whatever comes forward. That would become even more important.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: No problem.

The Chair: Mr. Boulerice.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to our distinguished witnesses who are taking this time in August to talk to us about issues related to the electoral system.

From the outset, it is important to recall this committee's mandate. During the election campaign, the Liberal government told us that 2015 would be the last election with a voting system that produces false majorities. It is a voting system that may be defined as winner takes all. In any given riding, a candidate who garners 32% of votes can win, while the 68% of votes that went to the other parties are thrown in the garbage.

Our mandate is to listen to experts, people from civil society, citizens, so that we try to achieve consensus on what we are going to propose on this issue.

My friends from the Conservative Party are basically using the referendum as a fig leaf. It's sort of like putting the cart before the horse. Before we ask whether we must hold a referendum, we have to find out whether we can agree on something. What will we propose? What would the question be? We are still very far from that. I want us to take the time to discuss and analyze the various options being proposed.

Mr. Johnston, in 2001, in an article published in *Policy Options* magazine, you said that a fundamental change to our electoral system was much needed. You concluded that proportional representation was probably the best system for Canada. You also said that the alternative vote or preferential ballot was probably not the answer to Canada's democratic malaise. You said that the alternative vote might work to ensure Liberal hegemony, since the Liberals, after all, are the near-universal second choice.

Do you still agree with Mr. Johnston from 2001?

● (1445)

Mr. Richard Johnston: *Touché*, Mr. Boulerice.

[*English*]

I underestimated.

You may recall, as I mentioned in my notes, in the same edition, that none other than Tom Flanagan and Ted Morton argued for the alternative vote precisely to solve the disunion on the right.

I think we all underestimated the resilience of the political order. I don't feel particularly remorseful. I think the concatenation of circumstances that made it possible basically for Stephen Harper to execute the reverse takeover of the Conservative Party were quite extraordinary. I think it was a remarkable feat of political engineering by him on the party side.

I'm inclined to say that it in some sense illustrates the power of the framework in inducing behaviour. Then, post-2006, while I'm owning up to bad predictions, I thought that perhaps the 2011 election had put the Liberal Party of Canada in an impossible situation. It is in truth, in most of the rest of the world, very hard to articulate a growth strategy from the centre.

Again, I underestimated the resilience of the system and of the parties that operated in overcoming these kinds of divisions. In the 2001 era, I thought that we were stuck in place. To the extent that I was making an instrumental argument, I am less persuaded of the power of the reasoning than I was at the time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Everyone is entitled to grow and change their minds.

We are going through a process that might require fundamental changes, electoral redistributions and lists of political parties. The Chief Electoral Officer of Canada has already given us some indication as to the time needed to change the system for the 2019 election.

Last October, a CBC article quoted you, stating that you were extremely skeptical about the ability or the probability that a Liberal government would be able to change the voting system by the next election.

Based on our timeframe, is it possible to make significant, not just cosmetic, changes?

[*English*]

The Chair: Be very brief, please, because we're at five minutes already.

Prof. Richard Johnston: They have it within their power to do this if they wish to act unilaterally.

● (1450)

The Chair: Thank you.

Prof. Richard Johnston: Whether that would be a change that lasts, I'll just say that I don't think it would guarantee them re-election, contrary to the view expressed in *Policy Options*.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Thériault.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault (Montcalm, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Gentlemen, thank you for contributing to the work of the committee.

To use a common expression, I would say that your words, especially Mr. Gibson's, are like music to my ears. My colleagues must have recognized some of my questions and comments in your remarks. Legitimacy is the basis for legality. Just because something is legal does not mean it is moral. We have seen this during the unilateral patriation of the Constitution. The judges of the Supreme Court considered it legal, but illegitimate.

Actually, if we want to change the democratic rules of Canadian society and the Canadian parliamentary system, we have to clarify which Canada we are talking about. Are we talking about the Canada of 1867 or the one after 1982? We cannot strictly reduce the Quebec nation to a geographic region or an ethno-linguistic minority.

That said, I think the deadlines we have to meet are not realistic. I also think that by calling a referendum, the goal is not to hinder the desire for change. In Quebec, as the official opposition critic for democratic institutions, I followed closely British Columbia's approach to the reform. I think the problem was the 60% formula. In my view, the 50% plus one formula needs to be the rule in democracy, even for changes of this nature. So we must figure out which process leads to this change. However, it seemed to me that British Columbia was a shining example.

Could you comment on that?

[*English*]

Mr. Gordon Gibson: You're talking in particular about the threshold as 50% and then 60%?

You can argue it both ways. Some matters—and I'll stick my neck out here—such as with Quebec's separation, once you get a vote of 50% plus one, the world has changed the very next day because you now have an item of instability that must be dealt with.

On the other hand, when you have an existing constitution that is working adequately, you may want to have a higher hurdle rate. I personally was very disappointed that the B.C. reform didn't go through because of the higher hurdle rate, but nevertheless I've never criticized that. I appreciate there are arguments that constitutional documents should have greater stability in order that the polity itself can rely on them.

I repeat that the matter of Quebec's separation, 50% plus one, is a different issue. I'm not talking about the existing Canadian Constitution, so—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault: In terms of the reform, I can understand your opinion on the issue of the Quebec nation. In terms of changing the voting system, I don't share your opinion on the constitutional aspects. I would like to hear the answers of the three witnesses on this.

I think the 50% plus one formula is sufficient, and you will understand why. If it is sufficient constitutionally or for the issue of the Quebec nation, it is also sufficient for the change of democratic rules.

The Chair: Mr. Thériault, are you asking each of the witnesses the question?

Mr. Luc Thériault: Yes.

The Chair: So we have one minute for the three answers.

Mr. Luc Thériault: Is that sufficient?

[*English*]

Prof. Richard Johnston: I don't think so.

Particularly to the extent that it is a change of formula, you are then changing the power balance among the provinces even without a change in the numeric constituency makeup of Parliament.

The Chair: Mr. Bricker.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I don't have a comment on that.

The Chair: Mr. Gibson.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: We have an established rule for changing our Constitution, which takes into account the various regions of the country for their own protection and for the unity of the country.

For example, we're going to establish a national citizens' assembly. I think they too should have a voting rule which is based upon the amending formula of the Constitution, which would be 7-50.

● (1455)

The Chair: We'll go to Ms. May now, please.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): First of all, thank you to all the witnesses for being here today.

I want to start with Darrell Bricker. In looking at polling information, I'm not terribly surprised. I want to walk through with you why I think the level of public awareness of this committee's work, although we're very engaged in it, hasn't yet caught the attention of Canadians. I'm not surprised. All our meetings so far have been in our first phase of work in the summertime here in Ottawa. We as a committee will be, as they say, "hitting the road", and between mid-September and just after Thanksgiving, we will be holding public sessions in every province and territory, including with open mike sessions to which anyone can come. We are attempting to be as inclusive and participatory as possible. There are also, as you know, town hall meetings, which not every MP is holding but many are holding.

In any case, I would be gratified to know if you would continue to ask those same questions as we get past Labour Day, and at a period of time where we believe, or at least I believe as a member of this committee, we will be hearing from and connecting with, and, I hope, raising awareness through media coverage of these meetings as they take place across the country. In a way we currently have not made a dent in terms of being a public event. We haven't done anything to attract attention. We haven't been on beaches shirtless. We've been really low-key.

I'm wondering, if we go past Labour Day in the way in which we plan, whether you have any expectations yourself that you could keep checking to see if we've made a dent.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: Absolutely. I think this is a critical issue for the country and at IPSOS we're always polling on issues that are critical to the country. I think we have a good baseline to work from. I'll be interested to see how it grows.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I'm also gratified that you asked the same question. I believe it was EKOS that put forward the formulation, "Some people say that any change...", as you've already read out.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: Yes.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Their numbers aren't very far different from yours, at about fifty-fifty.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: No.

Ms. Elizabeth May: That question of legitimacy is on a knife-edge, then. I think everyone around this committee, me included, thinks that changing our voting system requires public trust and confidence, which gets translated into the word "legitimacy". A referendum is one way, potentially. I have concerns about it; but let's say legitimacy can be conveyed through a referendum. Legitimacy can be conveyed through a public process and deliberation. Legitimacy can also be conveyed through citizens' assemblies. We've heard a lot of different proposals for how one would convey legitimacy.

I'm going to turn pretty shortly to Dr. Johnston to ask a question, to follow up on that, but do you have any comments on the range of things that convey public trust and legitimacy?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I think that once you get people at least aware of the fact that this is happening and this is being considered —by the way, being elected on that platform does not constitute awareness, as you already saw—and they become more engaged in it, particularly if they perceive there's something important about this and that they need to pay attention, I think they'd be open to looking at a number of different options.

I also think that the more you talk about it, the more likely people will be asking to really be engaged through some process that directly solicits their opinion, rather than just going to a town hall session or having their views mediated through some other mechanism.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Yes.

Turning to Professor Johnston, I'm at a loss, in that the opening line the article of yours in *Policy Options*, to which my friend Alexandre Boulerice already referred, is that "Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system no longer fits the facts of our electoral scene". Yet I also know that you've written extensively on the fact that we're pretty much alone, that we were among the first countries to use first past the post and to exhibit a consistent multi-party Parliament, going back to the 1920s. You've said that, "first-past-the-post no longer fits the facts of our electoral scene, if it ever really did." You also went on to say that "The way [FPTP] translates votes into seats always produces distortions."

The distortions that occur, and I'm not trying to use hyperbole, certainly get called a "false majority". Peter Russell also uses that term. We had a false majority in 2011 and we had another false majority in 2015. Those distortions are still occurring, and they result in some quite dramatic policy lurches.

Given your study in this field, I'm puzzled as to why you're concerned about the fact that first past the post doesn't fit our electoral scenes, which have changed due to Stephen Harper's uniting of the right.

● (1500)

The Chair: Be brief, please. I know it's a complicated question.

Prof. Richard Johnston: It isn't just Stephen Harper's uniting of the right. I've never been troubled by the fact that parliamentary majorities are most always "manufactured", to use the term of art in academe. "False majorities" is a partisan label, I think.

The facts that didn't seem to fit in 2001 concerned the ability of the party system to provide a reasonably healthy level of competition for office. I underestimated the ability of the political right to get its act together. And in 2011 and 2015, although I wasn't advocating one way or the other, I underestimated the capacity of the centre-left to get its act together.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): My question is primarily for Professor Johnston, but I'd be happy to have an opinion from everybody.

We've been talking about the value of accountability, but most of the discussion has been linked to local representation and people being able to hold their local representative accountable, that he or she knows the riding well and is able to advocate for it at the national level.

Professor Johnston, I know you've made some statements and written a bit about accountability within the MMP system, and about having the different types of MPs, with the list MPs and the local MPs, and having them creating coalition governments at the end of the day. How would you factor in accountability in the coalition governments and platforms we're talking about? Right now, under first past the post, you can see that this party ran on this platform. If they don't perform well at the end of the day, then you hold them accountable, or your local MP accountable, but when it becomes this mixed member system and coalition governments, how do you do that?

Prof. Richard Johnston: First of all, I'm not sure that the mixed member issue is particularly central to the question you're asking. Are you asking about coalition government?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: We've been hearing a lot that the mixed member system creates coalition governments oftentimes, or it also creates different levels. Please talk to both aspects of it.

Prof. Richard Johnston: It isn't the mixed member, as such, that creates coalitions, but the fact that it is a proportional system. The additional member component completely compensates, at least within the realm of arithmetic, for any disproportion at the constituency level.

I think the local representation component of electoral representation in the country is an oversold argument. One of the appeals of MMP to me is that you could have largish rural constituencies. You could have a disproportion that lets Nathan Cullen represent half the population of a typical Surrey riding. You could do that and fully compensate through the compensatory tier.

As for the question of the accountability of coalition governments, I think there are many systems in which they're perfectly accountable, and the focus is on the nucleating party, the one that is the *formateur* in the system. That's the one that, in some sense, takes the hit. There are coalition systems in which it does break down, because typically there's some pivot that is off-scale and extracts inappropriate equivalents.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Did anyone else want to comment? Otherwise, I'll move on to another question.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: If your main goal is local representation, then your best answer is the multi-member STV, because you will almost certainly find that one of the representatives from that riding has your particular point of view, whatever your point of view is. Of course, that's only one value, and there's a lot you want to satisfy.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: That's correct. Where would you rank accountability in terms of the values that we should be assessing here?

Mr. Gordon Gibson: It's certainly important. Overall government accountability is probably more important than individual member accountability. Governmental stability is tremendously important. I'd want to reflect on that a bit more before I gave a full answer.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Okay.

Mr. Chair, do I have any more time?

The Chair: You have about a minute.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I found the polls that you've done quite interesting, Mr. Bricker. It's surprising, and I think we have to work at improving the awareness of what's happening right now. I think we're up for the challenge.

Are there any other suggestions? Ms. May was asking about what we can do in the second half of our outreach when we're going across Canada. Is there anything you can advise us to do to increase that awareness amongst people about what we're doing? Hopefully we can come to a consensus at the end of the day.

● (1505)

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I think the number one job is increasing awareness.

All of you have run as candidates before, and all have done it successfully. I've certainly worked on a lot of election campaigns, and I can tell you that people won't vote for you and support you if they don't know who you are.

While you might want to get into all of the stuff I like to refer to as the "Yahtzee" for political scientists—all this very complicated craziness about how we should structure our system—the number one thing is to tell people that you're actually considering it and doing something about it and there's a way for them to participate in it, rather than trying to get into the complexities of what the outcomes will be.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Mr. Gibson, I have some questions for you to start with.

You mentioned in your opening statements, and I might be paraphrasing slightly, that the type of change we're looking at making here would be akin to a constitutional change. You elaborated slightly on that, but I wonder if you want the opportunity to elaborate a bit more on why you believe this would be akin to a constitutional change.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: It's because it's a part of our basic law; it's a part of the rules of the game.

That said, it would have been something that Parliament could easily have done before 1982 and there wouldn't have been any question about it. Whether it was a constitutional change or not, who cared? Parliament could do it.

Now it really matters whether it's a constitutional change, and only the Supreme Court can give that answer. My guess is that with their evolving view of constitutional architecture, as they call it, they would probably think it is part....

Mr. Blake Richards: I know you said earlier as well what you just stated again, and that's that no one can say with certainty whether this would meet the constitutional test. I think that's best exemplified by the fact that we've had witnesses before us unequivocally say, yes, this would be seen as a constitutional change. Others have said, no unequivocally; this wouldn't be. I think that illustrates the point quite well, that this is something where only the Supreme Court would be able to make that determination.

Now, in terms of legitimacy of the process, referendums are something that you obviously are arguing in favour of. I think there are a couple of quotes. There's one from you previously and one from today, where I think you illustrate that perfectly. First of all you said, "No rules are more important than those that determine which MPs will be elected and which party forms government." Then today I thought it was even more profound, "When it comes to the rules of the game"..."people want and deserve a [say]."

I want to take the experience you have from British Columbia and with the B.C. citizens' assembly there. There was a recommendation that any system was guaranteed to be put before the voters in a referendum.

I wonder if you could give us an opinion on whether you think that guarantee enhanced the work that was done by the citizens' assembly, whether it helped to keep things honest and neutral, and whether that was an important part of that process.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: Thank you. That's a very good question.

There's absolutely no doubt that such empowerment is absolutely essential to the credibility of a citizens' assembly. The assembly had a lot of credibility because the people knew, and the members of the assembly knew, that whatever they came up with would in fact be put before the people. If all they were going to be was another royal commission—and no disrespect to royal commissions—who cares? In this particular case, whatever they came up with was going to be voted on, and that made it very important.

Mr. Blake Richards: If we were to recommend this same sort of guarantee, that whatever comes out of this process would be put before the people in a referendum, would that add credibility to this process? Would that make this process greater and stronger?

Mr. Gordon Gibson: If this committee by whatever means, whether a citizens' assembly or whatever else, comes up with a proposition that is then affirmed by the people in a referendum, then in my opinion it is legitimate.

● (1510)

Mr. Blake Richards: To give that guarantee now at this point and say that no matter what happens the recommended changes will be put before the people, would that add credibility to the process going forward?

Mr. Gordon Gibson: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Aldag is next.

Mr. John Aldag (Cloverdale—Langley City, Lib.): I'm going to start with a couple of questions for Professor Johnston.

I always find it interesting to get people's written submissions, and as I go through them I grab things that jump out at me. The first one from yours that grabbed my attention was in your paragraph 9, where you say, “Proportional formulae require 'engineering' to get to an electoral result.”

It's the first time I've seen—I guess it's implied.... We've seen these mathematical computations and other things. The question I have is simply whether Canadians are ready for a more complex system. We heard about a system this morning from Germany, which was designed for us and that had a number of computations. When I saw the term “engineering”, I thought that's really what it is. It's taken from a straight kind of count and applying something else to it.

Do you think we're at a point in Canada where Canadians are ready for something more complex than a majoritarian or plurality system?

Prof. Richard Johnston: I don't feel comfortable answering the question straight-up. British Columbia bought a system that was in some ways actually the most complex, from the point of view of the voter, in the sense of a preferential ballot with a long counting mechanism. I would hope that whatever is proposed, the lead discussion of this does not actually focus on its complexity.

When I say “engineering”, I don't mean that as a pejorative term. I simply refer to the fact that the only self-executing system is first past the post, just in the sense that it guarantees a result: that's all. To go any distance beyond that, because there is almost never a, quote, “natural majority” anywhere anymore, if you're going to have a majoritarian system you need to have some engineering. Then the very idea of proportionality has a whole conceptual framework to it. It presupposes, for one thing, that the thing that is represented is political parties, the very thing that voters claim not to like; and that if you're going to achieve proportionality, in and of itself, but also given the rules of arithmetic, you need to have a set of counting rules that in some sense represents electoral engineering.

I think that is the thing that makes it a tough sell. I understand why people who want to make the sell are concerned about the referendum. Indeed, as Gordon can confirm, the discussion of the sell was important in the B.C. citizens' assembly. They happened to prefer STV anyway, but they concluded that MMP was a tougher sell because of the stuff in it.

Mr. John Aldag: Okay, good. Thank you.

Another one that jumped out at me and which you didn't go into a lot of detail about in your comments was in your item 13. Contrary to what other witnesses have said, you wrote that it's a bad idea to have “different combinations in different places”, such as rural versus urban. We have heard some compelling arguments made for why that might be the best in Canada.

Would you like to take the remainder of my time to give us your thoughts on why you think that's a bad idea?

Prof. Richard Johnston: Well, I accept that we do a delicate balancing in the federation. Why do we have the Senate floor for representation? Why are rural constituencies smaller in population than urban ones? We do a fairly delicate balancing, but I assume that it's the product of a process that takes all the interests into account. To actually go out there and engineer a system that....

This was, I think, Nelson Wiseman's particular pet from his days as a young lad in Winnipeg, I guess. There are memories of the way in which Alberta and Manitoba in particular were carved up, in which you had single-member districts outside the cities and multi-member districts inside the cities, when it was pretty clear in the Manitoba case that the whole point was to mute the impact of Winnipeg on the province of Manitoba even as you augmented the impact of rural Manitoba on the overall framework.

If you have, for example, the alternative vote outside the city and STV inside the city, then whatever else you're doing with the size of constituencies, you are putting in place in the cities an electoral mechanism that more or less does not augment differences in powers. Outside the city you are creating the prospect in which, say, a large minority could have its power amplified.

● (1515)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cullen, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Every system has its bias baked in. Right?

Prof. Richard Johnston: Absolutely.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Our system does, the American system does, the German one does, etc. It's interesting, because we heard from German witnesses this morning. They were asked if it were too complex, as my Liberal colleague just said. They said, no, people understand it, as they did in Ireland and Scotland.

Is it unstable? That's another myth around proportional systems. The results from all of our evidence that we hear at committee, from people who know, is that, no, it's not more unstable.

Is there not a local link, if proportional means that voters lose their local link with a direct representation? As Mr. Gibson and other experts have told us, that's also a myth.

All these myths get added up to create this somehow construed cloud that proportional systems would disenfranchise somebody somewhere and that voters are not going to like it, despite the evidence showing that people like it. I don't recall any evidence around the world of anyone going from a proportional to a first past the post system.

I have a question, Mr. Bricker, about your survey. I was a bit confused. You took a survey in May, and you asked a straight question on whether or not they wanted a referendum. The result was around 70%?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: It was 73%.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Then you asked a second question this past week and said, this is what's going on. There was not a lot of awareness, but you said this is what's going on, and then that number of people desiring a referendum dropped?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: Yes, because we gave them two choices.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Right. So suddenly there is a process. This question about validation and about how this is seen and what we attempt to do in this Parliament with this mandate is valid. "Legitimate" may be a better word for it by voters.

Is that the question you're seeking in your service?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: No. The question I'm seeking is where we want a process.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Right.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: If we're going to go through the process of changing our system, what is required in terms of consultation?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: For that legitimacy?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: Right.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Okay. So when people know that there's something going on....

I'll put a question to you before you've probably surveyed it yet. I'm going to ask you to speculate here. If only one party were to stand for a new system, I would assume that its credibility, its validity, would go down, as opposed to a scenario in which, I and many of us hope, we can achieve some sort of consensus here.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: What would happen is that Canadians would go to motives.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Right.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: Then the question is, why are they pursuing this change when other people don't agree?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Unilaterally.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: We actually saw this happen in Canada after the 2008 election when the Prime Minister made changes to the financing system for political parties.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Was there a political calculation in it?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: And it blew up.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Right. As it did, I would suggest, also with the unfair election act, which was unilaterally brought through Parliament changing the way people vote. It was seen as a more partisan calculation than it was some sort of hope for democracy.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: When people start to hear the screaming from people who are opposed to something, the automatic place that they go to is one of motive. Why is this happening? What is the purpose of this? Who has to gain from this? Then they look at the players who've come forward with whatever the opposite positions are, and then they evaluate it based on the credibility of the people who were talking about it.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It's very helpful.

Mr. Gibson, I turn to you. At one point, you wrote that the goal of electoral reform is "to design [a system] change so that the winners include the general public, with much less concern for the interests of the political parties." That means, flatly and bluntly, a system that gives you more control over who becomes your member of Parliament, and then gives your MP more power in the government.

Do you favour—I'm not going to suggest this—broadly proportional systems over the majoritarian system that we have?

Mr. Gordon Gibson: For British Columbia, yes. I work with the citizens' assembly. When I designed it, I had no views on electoral reform. Following their logic and deliberations, I thought they came to the right conclusion for British Columbia. Nationally, you have a different issue. Canada is a federation; British Columbia is not. The different regions of Canada are intertwined in the delicate balance here in Ottawa. One of the reasons that we're a federation is so that Ottawa won't have too much power and the regions will have considerable power.

Sir John A. Macdonald and Thomas Jefferson would have been appalled at the results of what they did, because Sir John A. wanted a highly centralized federation and the Americans wanted to decentralize, and it worked out the opposite way. We have a highly decentralized federation. Yet, I think if you go to a proportional representation system, you are going to centralize our federation more.

● (1520)

The Chair: Our time is up, but could you just say why you feel that would be the case? Just briefly tell us why you think it would become more centralized.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: There's the virtue of being the chair.

The Chair: Well, a little bit.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: It would be more centralized, I think, because all of a sudden no group could claim to speak for, say, Alberta.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: I'll use a more or less neutral example, because Alberta would be all over the place in terms of its representation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Rayes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for you, Mr. Bricker.

In your presentation, you said that holding consultations was not enough, but that it was important to see what the people really thought. Perhaps those are not the exact words you used, but I would like to know what you mean. Should we do more than just holding consultations over four weeks by going to certain places in Canada? Should we use other types of consultations, such as surveys?

[*English*]

Mr. Darrell Bricker: Well, yes, you should conduct polling.

That's a very good idea. I've done a bit for you.

In this modern age, with all the technology we have available to us, and the degree to which we're dealing with a highly literate, highly educated population, I think we should trust them. I don't usually take positions on these things; I just report public opinion. In this instance, I would say that the more you can do to solicit people's opinions, and not just the squeaky wheels who always show up at these town hall sessions, and the rest of it.... If you get out there, and you engage with the public, then you can bring them along on this in this discussion.

The situation you're dealing right now, I'll be honest with you, is that you're telling people they have a problem they don't know about. Few people have the problem this committee has. The second thing is that almost nobody understands anything about any of these solutions you're bringing forward. The hurdle that you're going to have to get over to generate public consensus and public approval is not small. Anything you can use, and whatever mechanisms you can get out there, to raise awareness of this process to tell them why it's important and to solicit their participation, I think both this committee and Canada would benefit greatly from.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: According to the results of the survey that you presented for the first time today, you conclude that 3% of Canadians are currently following the consultations. So 19% of the people who were surveyed know that the consultations have started and 16% of them are interested. You are talking about an elite interested in politics.

Overall, according to your monthly and annual surveys or those carried out during various elections, what is the percentage of citizens who truly follow politics and are very familiar with the platforms of the various political parties? Is the percentage about the same?

[*English*]

Mr. Darrell Bricker: No, it's probably a little higher than that, particularly on issues they're personally engaged with. This happens to be a particularly esoteric issue.

As I said before, it's a problem that people don't know they have. Few people understand what the solutions are that you're going to bring to the table and how they would improve anything. Right now people don't have a strong problem with the way their parliamentarians are elected.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: The minister or the prime minister tells us that the people voted for the Liberals. The two other parties say that the percentage of their votes combined would give them the legitimacy to make this change without consulting the entire population. Can we suppose that, even by adding all those votes, not all the citizens who voted for them were aware of this aspect among the many proposals brought forward and were in favour of it? We are talking about a hundred proposals for each political party. Statistically, could we say that?

[*English*]

Mr. Darrell Bricker: What I would say is that people do take promises made during election campaigns seriously. They do believe governments get elected on mandates. Do they understand every component of what a government is elected to do? No, they don't.

The primary reason the Liberals won this last election was that they best represented change. That's what people were voting for. What was the exact nature of that change? If you went through the platform, then you would be basically informing people rather than testing their knowledge. They don't really know.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: To have more legitimacy on such a fundamental issue, would the idea of promising a referendum at the end of the process add a lot of credibility in the eyes of the public regarding the work that we do?

● (1525)

[*English*]

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I think what the survey research evidence shows is that there is an expectation that there is going to be an effort made to solicit the opinions of people directly if you're going to change the election system in a fundamental way. To the degree you're successful in doing what Madam May said you will be doing over the space of the next while, I expect that your process will drive up the expectation that there is going to be some form of direct consultation.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Romanado will wrap up the first round of questions.

[*English*]

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.): I'd like to thank our esteemed colleagues for being here today.

I have to say that the panel this afternoon has been a little humbling. We've heard that only 3% of the population, mostly older, more educated, affluent men, are watching us closely; that what we're doing may or may not be constitutional;, and that what we're doing may or may not cost us the next election. It's a bit humbling, I must say, but I appreciate your honesty and your frank conversation.

My first question is for Dr. Bricker. In your online poll—and I'm not questioning the validity of your poll—the fact that it was conducted online would reinforce the minister's comments regarding our going after and hearing from the usual suspects. What we're trying to do is to reach out to Canadians across this land to hear what they think about electoral reform and the current system, what's going well, and what isn't going well. Do you have any plans for branching out your polling to use other methods to reach folks who may not have access to the Internet. Since said you were going to continue to do this, could you let us know?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: Sure. I would say that the other poll that was conducted used the telephone, and they got exactly the same results that we did.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Okay.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: So I don't think we're under-representing anybody specifically. In the last election, 68% of the Canadian population voted, which was a historic high for the last while. The correlation between the people who are voting and the people who are online is almost one to one.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Okay.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: In fact, most of the best polls that came out in the last election were all done online. So it's not really a question of representation.

As far as seeking out other methodologies are concerned, absolutely. We're always interested in making sure that we're best representing public opinion and we will continue to do surveys on this—although you're going to have to line up your time behind Madam May.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Darrell Bricker: She has the first questions, and we're going to move around the table here, but we'll see if we can make sure that we have good representation.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: That would be great.

I know that we've been talking a lot about the criteria for selection, or the guiding principles or the values that Canadians hold dear, because as we've heard, there is no one electoral system that will be the panacea for everything. There are some little tweaks we can do here and there. For instance, if we want to increase voter participation, we can look at mandatory voting or other things, such as adding more days for elections, letting people have the day off on election day, and so on.

I'm not trying to solicit you to do the following, but are you looking at doing any polling on the most important values or criteria according to the public? I ask because it's going to be a trade-off when we're making this decision, right?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: Yes, I think that we get into a real discussion about how we form governments and all the rest of it. Really what the public is looking for is accountability. They want to know who they can grab by the nose, if they don't like what's going on. The more complicated and the more distant you can make that, the less effective it will be seen as a tool for accountability by the public. I think that's pretty clear.

I think that as proposals emerge from the committee, as we see the form of the final report in December, it's an important public issue, and IPSOS will always be doing research on important public issues.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Dr. Johnston, you mentioned that whatever it is that we do, we must not revert back. We've heard from other witnesses saying that we should perhaps think about holding a referendum, maybe two or three election cycles after we change the system, to see if citizens are still happy with the change or if we should revert back.

I'd like to get your opinion on that.

Prof. Richard Johnston: I don't have a problem with a reconsideration of the change after it has really had a chance to sink in. New Zealand's second referendum struck me as perfectly appropriate.

The notion, though, that we should experiment in 2019 with a system and then have a referendum strikes me as inappropriate. We will see the results of the election—they could surprise us—but I doubt that the parties would have settled into any kind of equilibrium, so to speak, response to the rules of the game, nor will we actually know the identity of the full set of parties that is likely to emerge.

A notion of a subsequent consultation strikes me as perfectly appropriate—just not in the immediate aftermath. The notion that somehow we could have a trial run in 2019, and then we'll do a different one in 2023 or something like that, just strikes me as nuts.

● (1530)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Romanado, your time is up.

We will now start a second round of questions with Mr. DeCourcey.

[*English*]

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: I've certainly appreciated some of the recent conversations and the last lines of questioning around the importance of consultation. I believe it's a hallmark of what we've set out to do, to consult broadly with Canadians and encourage members of Parliament right across the country to reach out, as my colleague Sharon mentioned, to some of the unusual suspects, Canadians who oftentimes are left out of the dialogue on important matters that concern them.

I've also really appreciated the balanced approach this panel has taken in addressing some of the different value propositions in front of us, the different systems that embody those different values— and certainly the brief that you provided, Professor Johnston, does that. We've been very fortunate as a committee to have plenty of testimony on the merits and particular proposals within the PR family—which I think helps us take that to the public—albeit less so under majority systems.

You mentioned a bit about majority systems here in your brief. I wonder if you can perhaps expand upon some of the merits of a majority system. You talk about the two-round system as a traditional method of achieving a result. Are you familiar with the majority rule proposal that was presented to us yesterday by Dr. Maskin, and if so, do you have any insight on its merits?

Instead of having two rounds, it's essentially a way of developing what you call a "straight fight" through one ranked ballot.

Prof. Richard Johnston: That's the Australian system. Is it something different from that?

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: It is a little bit different from that. Of course, in AV the bottom candidate falls off and their second choice ballots are redistributed. In this system everyone's relative competition versus every other candidate is weighted together. But regardless of that, what about the merits of a majority system?

Prof. Richard Johnston: You have to understand that the animating spirit of any majoritarian system is essentially like that of the existing system. It just does it better and with fewer anomalies and, in particular, is less likely to produce what an academic would call "social choice perversities". It's not perfect. It's always possible that the true second choice of a majority of people on the ballot is eliminated before you can get to that candidate, but I think that's a relatively small problem.

If the majoritarian framework is the preference of the broad range of people, then I think the alternative vote is the way to go, because it does ensure that, as fairly as can reasonably be said, the person who emerges as the winner is preferred to the alternatives in a straight fight. That's, in some sense, the essence of functioning majority rule. It doesn't produce proportionality, make no mistake about that. It could produce some amount of functional coalition behaviour, but the record suggests not really.

The recent record in Australia, where governments of the right in particular have failed to get majorities, partly reflects other features in the system, in particular the existence of the more or less proportionally elected senate, which has had the effect of dissolving some of the claims of the big parties in House elections in Australia.

But in terms of general fairness, I do think that if you're operating within a majoritarian framework, a majority ballot is a better ballot than first past the post. I am of that view.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Based on your testimony—and tell me if I'm wrong—I would venture to say that regardless of what system is put in place, we can't know in perpetuity how it will benefit a particular party, how it will be perceived by the voters. It really depends on time and context and a lot of other factors at play.

● (1535)

Prof. Richard Johnston: Yes. There are broad tendencies that we can draw from the literature, but it's very difficult to take those broad tendencies and place them on a concrete result for the particular package that a particular country represents.

With your indulgence, can I just say one thing?

The Chair: Yes, of course.

Prof. Richard Johnston: The nature of political party organization is hugely important here. The majoritarian operation in Australia is vulnerable to backbench spills all the time. If you go to the old Parliament building in Canberra and look at the total number of Prime Ministers of Australia, it's enormous because of the spill system. That's hugely consequential, but it has nothing to do with the electoral formula.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Reid now, please.

Mr. Scott Reid: I used to live in Australia, so I've watched with great interest the Gillard-Rudd back and forth. I'm not sure if "tug of war" is a more apt analogy, or a "teeter-totter" or "push me pull you". Anyway, one of those analogies works well for that, and that's just the Labour Party.

Professor, I did want to ask about something you said earlier, but just in passing. I think I'm characterizing what you said correctly, and this is why I'm asking the question. Under MMP it is possible to have electoral districts with significantly different populations for the purpose of better representation in rural areas, better connection for the MP and the riding, and then to have the list system even it out so that you still get a proportionate result. Is that in fact what you said?

Prof. Richard Johnston: That is what I said. It obviously depends on how big the list component is relative to the single-member component. But I would think that one of the appeals of MMP in this country—it might have been part of the appeal in New Zealand, although I think they're thinking more of the German model—is that you can adjust the size of boundaries, as we do now, as a function of the difficulty of representing the place, but you can do so in a way that does not prejudice the balance of power amongst the parties relative to their support in the population at large, which it does do now, right?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, it does.

I sat on the parliamentary committee that dealt with electoral boundary proposals in both the most recent distribution and the one that took place in 2004. I don't know if it's affected the balance among parties, but it's definitely affected the weight that each voter's vote counts for in the House of Commons. Some of the boundary commissions have been very cognizant of that. In others, in particular my own province of Ontario, I think they've been quite abusive of that. As a result, people in certain parts of the province have votes that are worth a great deal less. That's just an editorial on my part. You gave me a chance to get it off of my chest.

Mr. Gibson, I did want to ask you about the citizens' assembly model. You indicated that you have documentation you're prepared to share with us as to how that model could be used nationally. A number of practical concerns have been expressed about whether that model, which was applied in Ontario and in British Columbia successfully, could be used once you start moving across time zones and have linguistic issues and so on.

I'd be interested in hearing what you have to say on this subject.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: I don't have any documentation prepared.

However, it seems to me that you could, if you wished.... You could start with the British Columbia model and then adapt it to the national purpose. You maintain, for example, the parity of gender. You maintain the same number of people per riding. It wasn't needed in the B.C. case because it was an overwhelming consensus, but if in fact decisions are made by vote, you have sort of a constitutional amendment type vote.

This is just me talking. You would probably only have one representative for every two ridings because I think 160 people, 170, is about as many as you can properly manage, but I might be wrong. You could try it with one per riding. In any event, you would get a very good representation of Canada with the same random selection. Of course, there's a self-selection part to it too.

Mr. Scott Reid: Quickly, in British Columbia the delegates met on several occasions, all physically in the same room together.

Is it your view that it is necessary, or could at least some of the consultation be done....? I'm thinking of expenses here obviously, and the way people spend their lives. Could it be done electronically online? It is, after all, a decade or more since the B.C. citizens' assembly. Or, is the value of having people in the same physical space something that can't be overridden?

● (1540)

Mr. Gordon Gibson: I think they have to meet, just as you have to meet here in this committee.

I think you have to be in the same room, and you have to do it seriatim, time after time. Get to know each other. Get to know the facts. Get to know the public. It's very much a learning process. It's just one small point of the whole political world, but there's a lot to be learned about electoral systems.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Monsieur Boulerice.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are talking about the various voting systems and the advantages and disadvantages of each. No system is perfect.

During the two most recent elections, in 2011 and 2015, the same thing happened, meaning that a party obtained 39% of the votes and 55% of the seats. For four years, these people have the majority in committees and in the House and can impose their viewpoints. This system has some advantages.

In the NDP, we think a mixed member proportional system also has the advantage of allowing stable governments to form most of the time, to have a link with the local elected officials and to produce public policies that have consensus support or broad agreement.

Actually, when the first past the post system completely fails the will of the voters, some take issue with that. That has not happened often at the federal level. In 1979, the Conservative Party was elected as a minority government although the Liberals had obtained more votes.

However, this has happened in Quebec three times within the same system, in 1944, 1966 and 1998. In those cases, the majority of voters had chosen a party, but because of the system's inherent distortion, another party formed the government. I personally said that it was unacceptable. Professor Massicotte told us recently that it was awful that something like that happened.

Mr. Johnston, don't you think that these historic examples should encourage us to opt for a system in which the popular will or majority would not be contradicted by the voting system?

[*English*]

Prof. Richard Johnston: I think the repeated occurrence of that is a perverse result.

On one hand, parties and voters themselves have conspired to reverse the perversity, so to speak. If you take the historical view, those things have not tended to persist indefinitely, but there's no question that it is one of the chief defects of first past the post.

The response to that particular defect is not necessarily to go to PR. The response could be to take the majoritarian logic of the system to its logical conclusion. I don't think you can draw any particular reform strategy from that, but I don't think there's any question that the social choice perversity is a problem of first past the post.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. Johnston.

Mr. Gibson, from what we have read, your position generally seems to favour voters over the political party and MPs over the government in place.

If we had to adopt a voting system with lists, would you be in favour of closed or open lists?

[*English*]

Mr. Gordon Gibson: First of all, I don't like lists—

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: You don't like lists.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: —but if I have to have lists, they should be open lists. I appreciate that a closed list will give you guaranteed gender balance, guaranteed ethnic balance, and all of those kinds of things, but I am one who is for strengthening the voter, not the political party. There always has to be a balance. The political party has to be strong enough to be accountable. But if there has to be lists: openness.

In response to your previous question, where you talked about dealing with some of the perversities of majoritarian democracy, they can also be dealt with through parliamentary reform as well as electoral reform. For example, you could have a completely different committee system with permanent staff and that sort of thing. You can do other things to empower the ordinary member.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Mr. Johnston, the only example of a democracy that is close to us or a western democracy that operates with alternative vote or preferential ballot is Australia. We see that this voting system leads to an extremely strong two-party system and the objectives of proportionality are not reached at all, if that's what we want to bring forward. In the past four Australian elections, the two main parties had between 96% and 99% of the seats. We can see the difference between this system and the system that is used to vote in the Senate. In terms of the place of women, over the past 50 or 60 years, two and a half times as many women have been elected in the Australian Senate with the single transferable vote compared to what has been happening in the House of Representatives.

Does that provide an indication of what might happen here if we applied a similar system?

● (1545)

The Chair: Mr. Johnston, please give us a short answer.

[*English*]

Prof. Richard Johnston: It's also true, by the way, for ethnic minorities. The Senate looks much more like Australia than the House does. The House is full of people named “Jeff”, as far as I can tell.

Voices: Oh, oh!

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*] Sheilas, too.

Prof. Richard Johnston: Well, no, the Sheilas are in the Senate.

The fact that the Australian parties have engineered STV so completely, and have the “above the line” box, which is pretty much the determining factor in the flow of the vote, means that in effect—notwithstanding what Gordon said—they've created a kind of closed list through the servants' entrance

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thériault, you have five minutes for questions and answers.

Mr. Luc Thériault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Since the beginning of the work of this committee, we have been saying we are open to a change, but not any change and not at any cost. It is not sufficient for us to be in favour of the change so that suddenly an aura of virtue appears above our heads.

Mr. Johnston, you rightly explained that this entire debate was over-determined by partisanship. That is why we think it is important to move beyond parties. It is not a debate between politicians, experts or insiders. We have to follow a process that, I hope, will allow us to reach consensus by December 1 and to give the public the possibility to reclaim this debate. To do so, we think we need to take a stand on holding a referendum right now. No system is perfect. If no system is perfect, the pros and cons of the various systems need to be weighed. If that assessment is left up to politicians, we will not come to an agreement.

It would be unfortunate if, on December 1, three trends emerged, we made no decision and we put everything on the shelf. If we want real change, let's not allow ourselves to be restricted by the deadlines of a prime minister who was perhaps too enthusiastic during the election campaign. Let's do this right.

I don't think I'm contradicting what you are saying, Mr. Gibson, Mr. Johnston and, I assume, Mr. Bricker. Given that only 3% of people know what we are trying to do, if this debate is left strictly in the hands of parliamentarians, it will be difficult to achieve the desired legitimacy.

Mr. Gibson, you said that this debate could not be done in an abstract way. Actually, the details are the problem. It is not enough to say that we want a mixed member proportional voting system to ensure that the model does not have a partisan bias. We have seen this in Quebec. The model chosen by the Charest government created 26 regions. Rather than encouraging ideological plurality, it strictly favoured the three parties already represented in the National Assembly.

Given that the details are posing the problems, what are you suggesting that we do about it? My suggestion is to hold a referendum at the same time as the election in 2019. At any rate, we have no time to do it before that. However, if we proceed as I'm suggesting, we will have the time to go to a second phase. This could be a draft bill on a specific model. We could then consult the people on something tangible.

We will consult the people now on their desire for change, but we have nothing specific to suggest. If the details are the problem, I am wondering how they will be able to have an idea of all the systems on which we will consult them. Could you comment on that?

Mr. Chair, I know it's long, but our way of operating—

The Chair: Let Mr. Gibson answer the question. His comments could perhaps fit into the five minutes you have.

● (1550)

Mr. Luc Thériault: We have cruel ways of operating, but they are our ways.

[*English*]

Mr. Gordon Gibson: I guess my response to that would be that your aims are very good and noble, but unless you all agree, I don't think anything is going to happen—at least not anything productive. If the government party uses its majority to go ahead against the opposition parties in this committee, there is going to be a big fuss, a big fight. There are going to be constitutional questions, and it is going to overtake a lot of other issues that are very important in the country and become a focus in the next election.

By contrast, if you are all agreed and you put the thing to a referendum, the public might very well accept it. If you are not, I think they probably won't.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault: Should we not consult the people as soon as we have something to propose?

It is not enough for us to agree. At the moment, I do not think that we are going to agree on a model. At least, we haven't done so yet.

The Chair: A quick answer, if you please, Mr. Gibson.

[*English*]

Mr. Gordon Gibson: I can't add any more. Yes, absolutely, the public should be consulted on a specific model, but first of all, who is going to design the model? In British Columbia, it was the citizens' assembly. Here it might be you. They have to have specifics. You are absolutely right.

The Chair: Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you. I'm glad I get another chance to try to get through questions.

I'm going to start with you, Mr. Bricker, and then ask some more questions of Professor Johnston. I hope I can get through the questions.

You said that some years ago you did some polling around the question of satisfaction with first past the post in general and that you hadn't done anything very recently. Some recent polling results from EKOS polling asked the question:

> Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:
>
> It is unfair that a party can hold a majority of the seats in the House of Commons with less than 40% of the vote

This was December 7 to 10 of last year, and I gather they were using land lines and cellphones. I don't really know what kind of difference it makes when you use online surveys. Do you go back to the same 1,000 people each time? Are they online all the time? So there's an online randomness among people. I don't know if it makes a difference, but this was land lines and cellphones. Apparently with 2.3% plus or minus 19 times out of 20, 56% of Canadians agreed that it was "unfair that a party can hold a majority of the seats in the House with less than 40% of the vote".

I'm wondering if you think the situation may have changed since you last asked people about whether they were generally satisfied with the voting system. What would you expect to find if you were to poll again?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I think an awful lot comes down to the questions you would ask. There's an inherent logic that there probably is something wrong just by the way the question was asked. That 40% equals a majority, well, the math just doesn't add up in people's heads. I would expect that 56% is a low result for that. I don't really like that question much.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I would hope that you'll ask other questions. I think the logic—

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I will.

Ms. Elizabeth May: —adds up in people's heads, because we expect that when we vote in an election.... Of course, the value of proportionality and fairness, which you've both reflected on, is very strong among Canadians. There is something quite counterintuitive that in a majority Parliament in the Canadian electoral system, where there is no separation between legislative and executive for all functional purposes, 100% of parliamentary power is in the hands of whichever Privy Council—and in some cases, where it's really centralized—of whatever Prime Minister has the majority of the seats in the House. If that derives from a minority of the votes, we're certainly hearing a very strong pull from Canadians that they don't find that fair.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: All I can do is say is, yes, when you get into conversations with people about that, they come up with those kinds of conclusions. But if you look at the levels of satisfaction that we see for this current government, even based on how they were elected, they're very high.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Oh, yes, but that's a different question, I think, from—

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I only answer the questions I want to answer.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Okay!

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Darrell Bricker: You guys do the same, by the way.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Elizabeth May: Actually, I answer questions I don't want to answer, but I'm unusual.

Professor Johnston, you made a comment right after the election that I think goes to this question of legitimacy. CBC News posted a very interesting interview in October, right after the election, about whether this voting system was going to change. You were quoted as saying that you were extremely skeptical about the likelihood of any federal electoral change under the Liberals. You reflected on the fact that B.C. and Ontario had tried, and you said that "opposition parties tend to talk a lot about democratic reform when they're in opposition and rarely deliver once in government".

Because I believe that the public cynicism about politicians is a problem in a healthy democracy and I think we've earned public cynicism, do you think when a government keeps its promises—and this was a point you made in earlier testimony—it matters to Canadians that political parties and political leaders keep their promises. In this case, given the history, as you say, that "opposition parties tend to talk a lot about democratic reform when they're in opposition and rarely deliver once in government", do you agree with me that it'll contribute to public confidence in a party that they deliver on their promises, and conversely contribute to greater cynicism that they failed to deliver on a promise?

● (1555)

Prof. Richard Johnston: You stated it as a general proposition, so it's hard to disagree. I guess I could also note that on a very concrete promise it would seem that the electors were perfectly willing to let the government take as long as necessary to meet its Syrian refugee total, for example. There was no particular requirement that the total be met within what proved to be an unrealistic deadline. I think that's true in this case as well. To deliver on the promise of abolition of an established electoral formula in the space of one Parliament, particularly when the machinery doesn't get rolling until the spring, strikes me as a stretch. Probably the only administratively possible form of change would be to the ballot—

The Chair: Thank you.

Prof. Richard Johnston: —in the time that we're talking about.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: My question is for Professor Gibson. In your introduction, you talked a lot about consequences that may not be considered ahead of time when changing an electoral system.

Yesterday, Professor Loewen presented an intriguing chart to us. He talked about the anti-legal immigration sentiment that has grown in European countries—in fact the countries that have PR, where these smaller parties have taken a dominant control on some of these issues. He mentioned Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands, the small parties have gained popularity and have taken a lot of seats.

Could this be a consequence that we may not be considering, depending on which electoral system we switch to? You had referenced Donald Trump winning the primaries in the United States due to some changes they made to their primary process. Can you elaborate on other consequences you could foresee, since you have thought about this issue quite a bit?

Mr. Gordon Gibson: I want to start by thanking you for promoting me to a professor. I've never been that before.

No doubt proportional representation, particularly extreme proportional representation as they have in Israel, gives organization and voice to very small groups of sentiment, some of which can be quite extreme. While our current FPTP privileges the regional representation, proportional representation privileges ideological representation. That might be Christian, it might be anti-immigrant, it might be whatever you like, but it's much easier to organize on a proportional representation model.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: These are big what ifs, right? I want to make sure we don't go down a path that we look back on years from now and regret. We want to get it right, and we want to make the right change for Canadians. Is there any advice you can give us about different consequences and obstacles we may not be considering right now that we should consider? If you have been following the committee's work, then maybe there are things you'd like to suggest to us.

● (1600)

Mr. Gordon Gibson: You know, we're in a curious place. Why are we here?

In British Columbia, it was because we had two perverse elections. The first election saw a government elected with less than the most votes, and the second one saw a government elected with 77 out of 79 seats with only 59% of the vote. The public said that something's wrong here.

We do not have that situation today in Canada. We are here because a political party—and forgive me for saying this—in a minor aspect of their party's promises, said we're going to be here. So we're here. However, there are no torchlit parades, as Dr. Bricker said. There is no public demand out there saying, "For God's sake, fix this", but one of these days there will be.

I think this committee can do good work in laying the foundation for that day. You might not find that this is the day, but I think you can do an awful lot of good research by asking how we can do a lot of sustained and legitimate thinking about changing our electoral system and putting in place an institution or institutions, such as a citizens' assembly, that might help us in that direction.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: What would you think would indicate that time?

Right now we've had many organizations that have been campaigning on this promise. They've told us that they have large numbers of members and there has been a lot of talk about this issue in terms of the last election. There have been citizens' assemblies in many provinces that have studied this issue. When would you consider it to be the right time?

Mr. Gordon Gibson: *When Citizens Decide*, from Oxford University Press, is probably the definitive book on citizens' assemblies. They're quite rare, and they tend to come about for non-partisan reasons, or when some political party gets the idea—as Dalton McGuinty did, or Gordon Campbell did, or a group in the Netherlands did—that we should do something about this. Apart from that, they just don't happen. You might choose to make it happen, but they don't come out of the blue. Most parties do not see that kind of study as being in their interest. Most parties want electoral reform to be their electoral reform to help them. It's just the way the world is.

The Chair: We have to go to Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: I have a question for both Mr. Bricker and Mr. Gibson. In her last round of questioning, Ms. Romanado mentioned a number of statements from witnesses today that she felt were humbling. One of those—which I actually don't recall hearing it from you, but maybe I missed something—was that it "may or may not cost us the next election". I assume that when she said that, she was referring to the governing Liberal Party.

Mr. Bricker, in your experience in gauging public opinion, if this were done without giving Canadians a direct say, without giving them some input, would it actually have some political consequences for the governing party?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: Yes. When you look at the agenda that Canadians hold dear right now, this isn't one of the top priorities they want to see the government focused on. When people worry about Ottawa's being detached from what's going on in the rest of the country—and believe me, it is—it just underscores the distance between what people are dealing with in their day-to-day lives and what parliamentarians choose to focus their time and attention on.

Is there political capital that's going to be spent as a result of that? Yes, I think there would be. On the other hand, if they could lead this process and come up with something that the public would find acceptable, they might actually add to their political capital. Right now, as I said before, this is an issue that few people know there is a problem, and almost nobody understands any of the solutions that anybody wants to bring forward, or why any of them makes anything better.

Mr. Blake Richards: I would assume that part of that would involve, at the end of the process, giving people some kind of a say, whether it be a referendum or.... I fail to see what the other mechanism would be. Letting the public have a direct say, I would assume that would add, obviously, to—

Mr. Darrell Bricker: At this time in Canadian history, as I said before, with all of the most educated, most literate population in this country, and the best technology to give people an opportunity to have a direct say, it's really hard to come out and tell people they can't have that form of participation. I'm not saying it's the best way to proceed, but I'm just telling you what the nature of public demand is.

● (1605)

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Gibson, based on your practical political experience, what would be the potential political consequences if the governing party were to ram through changes without giving people a say in a referendum on those changes?

Mr. Gordon Gibson: If you decide to have a referendum, you won't lose. You hand the problem to the people. You say, here's the best we can do, or here's the best a committee of Parliament can do, now you tell us. You can't lose on that one.

You can lose if you say this is what we—our political party—want to do, and make it a political issue. You can really lose on that one.

Why lose when you don't have to? Punt the ball to the people, who really deserve to carry it.

Mr. Blake Richards: I think that is an absolutely great piece of advice. I certainly hope the Liberal members—and I see that the Parliamentary Secretary for the Minister of Democratic Institutions is joining us today—are listening and will choose to take that advice, because I think it's a vital and important piece of advice. It's something the Canadian want, and it's something the Canadian people deserve. Thank you very much for your opinion today.

The Chair: We'll go now to Mr. Aldag.

Mr. John Aldag: Mr. Gibson, I'd like to carry on this conversation that we've just been having. First of all, I was looking at your brief and your statement in it that "Every party makes unwise promises". Then I look at the how we Liberals had electoral reform in our campaign commitments, as did the NDP and the Greens. You are saying that 60% of the parties had unwise promises and and that 63% of Canadians voted for those unwise promises. To me, I think, is there nothing there? I'm not saying that we have a full mandate or legitimacy, or whatever, it's just that the Liberals aren't the only ones who made this commitment.

Then you made the comment that we don't have torchlit parades on the issue, that we're not falling apart. I tend to think, isn't this the time to have the discussion? I would hate to get into the situations in B.C. you mentioned, where the system goes horribly awry, and we end up with a system that doesn't reflect the will of the people, and then we're stuck with it for four years. We've heard from other witnesses that in that circumstance, there's very little political appetite to change it because it's working for that party.

I actually think this is the time to have the discussion with Canadians. A lot of Canadians have said they're ready for this kind of discussion.

You were involved in the B.C. process and I'd just like to know, from your perspective, was that a success or a failure?

Mr. Gordon Gibson: First of all, there is of course much merit in what you say about planning ahead. Second, I don't agree that just because three parties promised electoral reform and 61% of the people voted for them, they voted for that issue, because there were a lot of issues being voted for. Third, Jean Chrétien promised to get rid of the GST and carried on as Prime Minister for a number of years thereafter.

Coming to your more direct question, I think the B.C. citizens' assembly was a great success. It was acknowledged to be by virtually everyone.

Richard, your research will have something to say about this, but indeed it is very clear that one of the main reasons the proposal of the citizens' assembly got the majority it did was that people trusted the assembly process. It wasn't because they understood STV—most people would say, "What is this stuff?"—but they trusted that a group of their citizens had worked hard and long for a year to come up with something in good faith and that they were objective, disinterested people.

Mr. John Aldag: On that, I live in B.C., and we still have first past the post. Great work went into that. There were great minds. Our fellow citizens came up with recommendations, yet through a referendum process it failed. I guess I just get a bit concerned when there is talk of a referendum or other.... Bars can be set to ensure that nothing changes. I have a real concern, sitting at this table, that we are perhaps, from some fronts more than others, positioning to make sure this fails.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: As Mr. Thériault says, you don't have to set the bar at 60%, where British Columbia did. You can set the bar at 50% plus one, or anywhere else you like.

Mr. John Aldag: We have heard a number of times that consensus at this table is going to be needed, so we need consensus at this table to come up with that. Will we have to have a consensus agreement that 50% plus one is needed, or some other threshold, to gain legitimacy for the process? I am just trying to understand. If we end up with a consensus report, does that give us enough legitimacy with the process that we have embarked upon to perhaps bypass or forgo the idea of a referendum? Are there other options that will get us there, to actually move forward this conversation, so we don't have the torchlit parade down the road?

● (1610)

Mr. Gordon Gibson: I think you can absolutely take to the bank the proposition that the more consensus this committee can achieve, the better chance you have at making change.

Mr. John Aldag: Okay.

Is there still a minute?

The Chair: You have about 40 seconds. That includes the answer.

Mr. John Aldag: Mr. Bricker, really quickly, have you done anything on online or mandatory voting? Have you seen any research on that with Canadians?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: No, I haven't personally.

Mr. John Aldag: Okay. I wasn't sure if you might have asked questions on that.

I will leave it at that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aldag.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Cullen, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I was just reflecting on John's comments there. We proposed a version of the citizens' assembly here, back in February. I wish you had been working in the minister's office or had some influence, because then we could have had this happening in parallel and the legitimacy question would have been enhanced for all of us.

I have a small correction, Mr. Johnston. My riding is about 95,000 people. It also just happens to be bigger than Poland.

Something that seems to be dismissed in a lot of this conversation is that nine million votes by Canadians in the last election are not reflected in our Parliament. It seems like such a casual dismissal in the questioning. I don't accuse you of omitting it from the answer, but I am thinking about the Conservative voter in Toronto, the New Democrat voter in the Maritimes, or the Liberal voter on Vancouver Island. In some cases Liberals, or whoever, received 25% or 30% of the vote, or the winning MP, in this distorted system we have, received less than a third of the support from their constituents, yet we maintain this fallacy that this person is as clear a representative as under any other system. I would argue, on an intuitive level, as Mr. Bricker said, that they are not.

Have you posed the question, Mr. Bricker, of the idea—it has been shot down here by Mr. Johnston, but supported by other witnesses—of trying out a new voting system and then having the test, the buy-it-back proposal, where citizens are able to say, "We don't like what we have seen, and we would like to cast it to the side"?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: No, I haven't done any research on that, but I would expect that if what we are talking about right now requires as much explanation and work as I think it will require, going that next step will probably be even.... If you are already a bridge too far, you have probably gone about five bridges too far.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: The question of change is part of your business. You ask questions about change, when changes are proposed. From my perspective, dealing with voters through five elections now, there generally seems to be an inherent resistance to change, particularly if it is complex change. If this is your cup of coffee, but there is this great store down the way with better coffee, but I can't explain it to you, really, because it would take too long—but it is better—most voters would say, "Even if it is better, even if the price is better", or whatever, "I am going to stay with what I know, because you can't explain what is coming." Is that not inherent to this? When we get into the questions about referenda and about straight polling—do you want to keep what you have, or do you want something new—the ability to explain the "new" is as critical as whatever the new happens to be. Is that fair to say?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: What I would say, first of all, is that in the last election, people clearly voted for change and they're happy with it.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Right.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: When people are presented with the proposition of change, when they feel there is enough reason for change, they have no difficulty jumping onboard. In fact, it drove up voter turnout in the last election to a very high level.

On a specific proposition, which is what you're asking about, if you're incapable of explaining to people why this change benefits them, they will say no.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes, so if I say to the people you poll, "Your vote will count regardless of whom you vote for and where you cast that vote in the country", would that be an interesting question to—

Mr. Darrell Bricker: Yes, absolutely. It will be one that I'll ask.

You're right behind her on the list.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Oh, very good. We can order up the list.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Darrell Bricker: You're on order.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It seems to me this is a potential debate where spinning mistruths and myths, as was done yesterday.... That one snapshot view of one set of elections in Europe suddenly made proportional systems equivalent to having anti-immigration parties, despite 60 to 80 years of vast understanding showing that's not the case. Then that myth got propounded again here today. The advantage goes to those mythmakers when talking about electoral reform.

Mr. Gibson, you went through this. You watched this group of British Columbians attempt to allow change to take place in their communities. How important is it for us to have champions, outside the political people involved, who are explaining and bringing in input from other Canadians?

● (1615)

Mr. Gordon Gibson: It is absolutely central. As a matter of fact you just summarized the last sentence of the the book, *When Citizens Decide*, which reads: "So, even when citizen assemblies prove to be an instance of intense participatory, deliberative, and epistemic democracy, the setting in which assemblies exist may undo all the good they are able to achieve." In other words, the sales job that's done on the production job is absolutely crucial, and that, in turn, depends upon the context and the political support.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: In Ontario, a citizens' assembly proposed some changes, yet many of the political parties and political actors, including the *Toronto Star* editorial board were picking away at it, shooting it down. It showed itself to be an influence as compared to....

Yes? Would you agree with that? I don't want to put words in your mouth.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: Absolutely. That absolutely killed it in Ontario.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll go to Monsieur Rayes, *s'il vous plaît*.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My colleague made an argument for the mixed-member proportional voting method in which each vote must count. He mentioned that, in the last election, the votes of nine million people did not count.

When I bring this up with people in my constituency, they all wonder which options would be open to them if there were to be a change. I explain the different voting methods to them, I tell them about the mixed-member proportional vote and I explain that the number of constituencies would have to be reduced by about half. I use myself as an example and I tell them that their MP would have to have a larger constituency. Now, I represent a rural constituency that includes 40 municipalities. If I was newly elected in a larger constituency, I could easily double that number of municipalities.

But my constituents say that their priority is to have access to their MP so that they can tell him about their concerns and so that he can properly represent them in Ottawa and properly bring forward their concerns for society.

So that makes me a little distrustful of this model. When people tell me that they want to have access to their MP and I think about the time that MPs spend in Ottawa, almost eight months per year, I try to imagine what I would do in a different situation.

I would like to put some questions to our three witnesses and I would like them to give yes or no answers. Do you consider that the procedure established by the current government is a good one, yes or no?

Go ahead, Mr. Gibson.

[*English*]

Mr. Gordon Gibson: It depends on how well you do.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Your turn, Mr. Bricker.

[*English*]

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I think it depends on outcome. I totally agree.

Prof. Richard Johnston: I think the insistence on some form of answer before the end of this Parliament is the best guarantee that nothing will happen.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Yes or no: do you consider that the government has allocated a reasonable amount of time in order to fulfill this mandate of reforming the voting system, as they announced to the people in advance?

What is your opinion, Mr. Gibson?

[*English*]

Mr. Gordon Gibson: If the committee does not like the time period, you should ask for an extension.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: It is going to be a challenge. It's a very short period of time for something so important.

Prof. Richard Johnston: I've basically given you my answer.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Thank you.

Mr. Gibson, would you be in favour of the committee ultimately recommending a referendum to legitimize this whole approach, yes or no?

[*English*]

Mr. Gordon Gibson: In my opinion, yes, any significant change in the electoral system should be subject to validation by the public in a referendum.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: My personal preference doesn't matter. I would just report what we reported in the survey, which is that that's what the public's looking for.

Prof. Richard Johnston: I have a more complicated answer.

I think the legitimacy of the result requires some sort of dialogue, as it were, between this committee and something else. It doesn't have to be the whole electorate in referendum.

As I said in my opening remarks, I don't think the population really demands to be consulted, notwithstanding the survey result. The concern is that whatever is proposed can somehow credibly be detached from the interests of any single party representative here, or possibly even the parties that happen to populate the Commons now. Some sovereign entity, not a citizens' assembly or an expert body or whatever, has to choose. I think it could actually be the Parliament of Canada, if it is asked to choose in a way that in some sense forces its hand between the status quo and an alternative that is defensible.

● (1620)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Are you in the 50% of the people who are satisfied with the current voting method, yes or no?

Let me start with you, Mr. Johnston.

[*English*]

Prof. Richard Johnston: It is an alloyed bad when the support is so low, but it's not an unalloyed bad.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: So you're asking if 50% plus one would be sufficient?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Bricker, are you satisfied with the current voting method? Are you in the 50% of the people who are satisfied with the current method? Can you give a quick yes or no answer?

[*English*]

The Chair: Do you like the current system?

Mr. Darrell Bricker: I don't think my opinion of the electoral system matters at all. That's not what I'm here to talk about.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Gibson, do you want to add anything?

[*English*]

Mr. Gordon Gibson: In the current circumstances, it's acceptable, but we could do better.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rayes.

We will end this afternoon's session with Mrs. Romanado.

[*English*]

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: We've heard over the last couple of weeks from various witnesses that our electoral system and democratic reform are not just about the actual voting system. They're an ecosystem in a sense, taking in how we educate our citizens on civic literacy, whether or not we offer technological advances, how we do outreach, how we engage youth—we had a huge youth engagement in the last election, which we hope to continue—how we encourage women and visible minorities to consider running for office, and so on.

As my colleague Mr. Cullen mentioned, in the last election, millions of Canadians felt that their votes didn't count. We're trying to increase engagement in the political process, which is why we're sitting around this table.

Mr. Gibson, I understand your warnings to take our time and do this right, and I agree with you. We need to do this properly. We don't want to take a reactive approach, so that when we come to a situation, we panic and think we have to fix this right now. We need to do our proper due diligence and make sure that what we come up with is best for Canada and that Canadians agree with us.

I'm hopeful that this committee can come up with a great Canadian model to address some of the issues that we've been mandated to address.

Given your experience with the British Columbia citizens' assembly, what advice would you have for us to move forward, given our mandate in this committee and keeping in mind the electoral deadline we have that the Chief Electoral Officer said could be met?

Mr. Gordon Gibson: To be clear, your hypothesis is that it is a unanimous committee?

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Okay.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: If you have that, then I think you can win a referendum—

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Okay.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: —at the next election.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Okay.

Mr. Johnston, do you have any suggestions for us as well in terms of our mandate in trying to get the ball rolling on electoral reform?

Prof. Richard Johnston: My view is that if you're really serious, you would try to get the rules of the situation changed. I don't see how you could break out of the current situation short of a serious breakdown of the representative process at the next election.

Mr. Darrell Bricker: What I would say is that the mandate of this committee as I understand it is a lot wider than just whether or not we have the first past the post system or not.

There are a lot of other irritations in the way our election system operates that represent clear areas of opportunity for you to actually be able to build some consensus with the Canadian public. There are things that involve technology. There are things that involve, as somebody was mentioning, the dates on which we vote. If you start building from those things on which people do agree, there might be something that could move along as an agenda here without your necessarily having to focus on that one big thing to start. I would say there is an opportunity to produce some form of a reform proposal that wouldn't necessarily have to go to a referendum, because it involves cleaning up a whole series of different things that people would see as reasonable things to do, given the time and age that we're in, and that should have been changed a long time ago. Then you can focus on the other question, which I think is going to be a very, very difficult thing to move even through this committee, in making a proposal and moving forward as legislation through the House of Commons and the Senate.

● (1625)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Do I have some more time?

The Chair: You have about 40 seconds.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Okay, I'm good.

The Chair: Thank you very much to our witnesses for, among other things, underscoring the challenge that is before us. It is indeed a big puzzle. We're working very hard at understanding the complexity of the issue, and your insights and opinions will certainly help us along the path to a successful report, hopefully, and a way forward.

So thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Committee members, we are going to suspend the session for 15 minutes. Then we will come back in camera to discuss future committee business.

Mr. Cullen, do you have a point you would like to make?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Do we need to suspend the session for 15 minutes?

The Chair: Do you prefer 10 minutes?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Okay.

The Chair: What do you want us to do?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: We only have one motion to consider, don't we?

The Chair: No, we have something else to look at.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Okay.

The Chair: It won't take very long.

Once again, I thank the witnesses very much for being with us today.

We are suspending the session for 10 to 15 minutes. We will see you in a few moments.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

● (1625)

(Pause)

● (1740)

[*Public proceedings resume*]

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Cullen, would you like to present your motion?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes, I believe you've heard it. That's it.

I don't know if you read it out yet.

The Chair: I think I read it a moment ago, or maybe I didn't. I'll read it again.

[*Translation*]

The motion asks the following:

> That the committee confirm, publish and advertise its travel to Iqaluit as soon as possible; and, when the committee holds its hearings in Iqaluit, full Inuktitut translation services be made available to the public.

Mr. Cullen, do you want to say a few words about your motion?

[*English*]

Mr. Nathan Cullen: You said it beautifully, Chair. It's a particular part of our country that not a lot of people are familiar with. Having translation in Nunavut would be both respectful and vital to our having a good conversation there.

The Chair: As a note of information, I spoke to the clerk about this yesterday, and they're looking into this.

Does the clerk have anything?

[*Translation*]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Christine Lafrance): We are trying to find out if it would be possible to obtain those services at no cost, but that is not yet confirmed. We are in the process of assessing how much the services would cost otherwise and we will include those costs in the committee's travel expenses.

The Chair: Great.

If we do not get those services free, we will pay to get them. Is that a correct understanding of what you said?

The Clerk: Yes.

The Chair: Okay.

[*English*]

Does anybody object to this motion?

No?

Mr. Scott Reid: I have something to say about it, which might result in an amendment. Let me address it first, and then we'll see if an amendment is appropriate, or if it could be dealt with informally.

It's just this. We all know this came up because the minister held a town hall in Nunavut, and there was no Inuktitut translation. Concerns were raised about that. Not being an expert in the Inuktitut language, out of curiosity I looked it up, and discovered that Nunavut has two official languages in addition to English and French: Inuktitut and another language called—and forgive me, as I may not pronounce this correctly—Inuinnaqtun, which is the language of the Kitikmeot region. The Kitikmeot region, if you have a mental image of Nunavut, is the western part of Nunavut. It's an area that sometimes feels left out of Nunavut politics. If you read the Wikipedia article on it, you'll learn why. It's physically separated. It's in a different time zone and also has a different language. To get from there to Iqaluit, you have to leave the territory and fly south. It costs about $2,000 to go one way according to Wikipedia. I haven't checked this out myself.

You can see the point that if we're trying to be inclusive, then it's important to do this. Some people say it's a dialect. Some say it's another language. This is a debate for linguists, but I wanted to mention that.

We'd probably support that.

The second thing I want to mention is that if you look at it, Inuktitut is the aboriginal language in Canada that has the largest number, by far, of monophones, or monolingual people who speak only one language, and neither English or French. That includes people in Nunavut. There's also a large Inuktitut-speaking population in Nunavik, which is the northern part of Quebec. Realistically, most of the models of electoral reform that we're looking at are not going to affect Nunavut. There will not be, for example, STV or MMP in Nunavut, no matter how much we would like to introduce it at the federal level, because there's only one seat for the territory. While it's worthwhile hearing what people who live in Nunavut have to say on the subject, it is worth remembering that this will affect them a good deal less than the people who live in Nunavik, who are not a small population. The number of Inuit people there, based on the reading I was doing on this, is about one-third of the population of Nunavut. These people who will be affected by changes, and who might be affected by changes that result in either multi-member districts or increases to...their district is already enormous. Possible larger increases would be very relevant to them.

I'm suggesting that we try to find some way of informing Inuktitut speakers, who do not reside in Nunavut itself, to participate in this particular meeting. I think it will prove profitable to them. Surely—

● (1745)

The Chair: You're saying that we should publish the fact, advertise the fact, in Nunavik that we're travelling to Iqaluit?

Mr. Scott Reid: Effectively I'm saying that. I was going to add that there is an Inuit community here in Ottawa as a result of the fact that Iqaluit and Ottawa are connected by air. Ottawa has become a centre of Inuit population. The Baffin Larga community centre is actually in the neighbourhood I live in.

The Chair: Are you saying that we should inform them so they can travel, or are you suggesting—

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, so they can participate. I assume that in order to be inclusive, we are going to have some kind of means of electronic communication associated with this meeting. Otherwise people living in places like the Kitikmeot Region will only be able to attend and participate if they have the $2,000 in pocket money available to fly to Iqaluit. I am saying that we should publicize the fact that we're having a hearing in the Inuktitut language, and possibly as well in the Inuinnaqtun language—yes, absolutely.

The Chair: So the first thing is that we should try to find some interpretation for the second language.

Does everyone agree with this, that we should see if we can find some interpretation?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: A general thought, Chair, was just to rely on local knowledge as to the appropriate.... I think Scott has a point, that there are four official languages. If the local folks we're working with believe that's of importance, then absolutely.

The Chair: So we're going to try to find interpreters for two of the languages. Okay, good. We seem to have agreement on that.

The other point is that we should somehow link northern Quebec to the consultation.

Mr. Scott Reid: And the rest of Nunavut. One of the problems with the minister's consultation—I'm told 16 people were there—is that Iqaluit is not the territory. It's physically difficult to get there. We want to have more success in reaching people both in the territory and speakers of non-official languages as widely as we can.

The Chair: Okay.

Can we have some text? I guess this is an amendment.

Mr. Scott Reid: The first part about the language should be an amendment. As for the rest of it, I've raised the issue, and as long as there's a consensus in the committee, I'm sure—

The Chair: Okay, we'll look into that.

Mr. Scott Reid: —the effort to make it as inclusive as possible, Mr. Chair, would be fine.

The Chair: Okay, good.

Why don't we have an amendment to the motion. We'll vote on the amendment, then we'll vote on the motion, and then we'll leave the clerk and the secretariat to look into how we can link up with as many people as possible, with the community of interest—I guess is a good way of putting it—when we're there.

Could you give us some wording for the amendment?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes. If we take Mr. Cullen's proposal, I would only mention the part about language there. This was the reason, by the way, for wanting to be in public, so this stuff would go on the record—

The Chair: Right. Sure.

Mr. Scott Reid: —and we could establish a consensus, rather than the formalities of an amendment.

So simply, it's that the committee confirm, publish and advertise its travel to Iqaluit as soon as possible; and, when the committee holds its hearings in Iqaluit, full Inuktitut translation services be made available to the public.

The Chair: So, translation services.

Is everyone in agreement with the amendment?

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: Is everyone in agreement with the motion as amended?

(Motion as amended agreed to)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I agree with the amendment of that.

The Chair: So we'll meet again at 8:30 tomorrow morning. We'll discuss business as agreed. It's a subcommittee meeting, not a full committee meeting.

Can we have a motion to adjourn till...?

● (1750)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault: Which room will the meeting be held in?

The Chair: We will let you know about that.

I don't think we need a motion to that effect.

[*English*]

The meeting is adjourned.