

**Submission to the Special Committee on Electoral  
Reform**

**15 August 2016**

**Sean Casey, M.P. Charlottetown  
Wayne Easter, M.P. Malpeque**

**Prince Edward Island**

## Foreword

The House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform has been tasked by the House with conducting a study into alternative voting models in the hopes of revitalizing our democracy.

Some voters have always lamented that the first-past-the-post voting system, currently used in Canada, tends to inflate majorities in the House and may lead to vote-splitting and strategic voting. In short, the first-past-the-post system does not reflect the wishes of many voters.

To that end, the Prime Minister committed, during the last election, that 2015 would be the last electoral race conducted under the first-past-the-post model. It is the job of the Special Committee to deliver a recommendation on an alternative model.

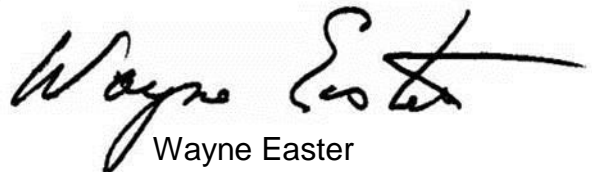
As Members of Parliament, it is our duty to consult with constituents and ensure their voices are heard in Ottawa. We were proud to host a town hall on electoral reform on July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016, to solicit input and answer questions as the Committee embarks on an ambitious agenda.

This report contains information about the event and the feedback we received. Our event was attended by over seventy constituents, many of whom identified strongly with the case for reform.

We sincerely hope the Committee will take into account the comments herein as it continues to hear about alternative models – and ultimately, when it recommends a model to the House of Commons.



Sean Casey  
Member of Parliament for Charlottetown



Wayne Easter  
Member of Parliament for Malpeque

## **Town Hall on Electoral Reform**

**Date: July 12, 2016**

**Location: Holland College**

**Charlottetown, PE**

**Hosted by: Sean Casey, MP for Charlottetown and Wayne Easter, MP for Malpeque**

Moderator: Katie Morello

Note taker: Emily MacDonald

Panelists: Mark Holland, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Democratic Institutions  
Jeff Collins, Sessional Professor, UPEI  
Anna Keenan, Community Organizer and Campaigner

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### **INTRODUCTION—SEAN CASEY**

Sean thanked everyone for attending the event and thanked the panelists for sharing their insights on the topic. He noted that we have a very informed electorate on Prince Edward Island especially with the provincial process on electoral reform well underway.

Sean gave an overview of the consultation process that is commencing. This Town Hall is one of many that will take place across Canada.

During the last election, now-Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that the 2015 election would be the last time Canadians vote using a First Past the Post (“FPP”) system. The Government is committed to that election promise.

Notes from this Town Hall will go forward to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, per their call for submissions.

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### **PRESENTATIONS BY PANELISTS**

#### ***Jeff Collins***

Jeff Collins provided a historical overview of electoral reform in Canada. He noted that in early Canadian history, provincial elections in Western Canada used preferential voting in rural areas and single transferrable vote in cities. In Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland dual member voting systems were in place before the FPP system was adopted, with PEI using FPP to elect two members in each district up until 1996.

Mr. Collins discussed the increased dialogue and call for electoral reform in the 1990’s and 2000’s. He indicated the context for this development was disproportionate election results across the country, the proliferation of political parties, decreased voter turnout and concern over a “democratic deficit.”

The Law Commission of Canada advocated for a Mixed Member Proportional (“MMP”) system in 2004. Shortly thereafter Prince Edward Island appointed a Commission on Electoral Reform

which recommended a MMP system. A referendum was held and 65% of people rejected the proposal. There was low voter turnout of only 33%. The failure has been attributed to a number of factors including the super majority that was required, lack of public education and limited polling stations. Mr. Collins noted that the same factors were present in other jurisdictions where referenda were unsuccessful.

British Columbia had a referendum on adopting a single transferable vote model in 2005 following a Citizens Assembly process. There was 58% voter turnout but the vote was unsuccessful because a super-majority was required.

Ontario had a referendum on adopting an MMP system in 2007. There was 53% voter turnout and the reform was rejected.

Quebec and New Brunswick undertook processes and studies on electoral reform which recommended referenda but none were held after changes in government.

Mr. Collins noted that all political parties have their own interests but that is not necessarily a bad thing. While all provinces thus far have used or advocated for referendums he is sympathetic to the current approach of the Government of not having a referendum. He shared that, according to Elections Canada, the cost of a referendum would be \$300 million. He said that there can be different ways to make change but the legitimacy will affect how Canadians view the outcome. He noted that most Canadians favour a referendum. A failure to get broader support from other political parties would increase skepticism about the process and the recommendation that is ultimately made. He also suggested that Canadians ask themselves broader questions about how to address inequalities in representation and in society and the power of the prime minister in our system.

### ***Anna Keenan***

Ms. Keenan said it is very positive that the Liberal Government made the commitment for electoral change in the last election and have taken steps to set up a legislative committee. She also praised the Government's decision to set up the committee in proportion to the election vote and not have a majority even though it is not in the Liberal Party's best interest.

Ms. Keenan shared her passion for electoral reform. Her work advocating for climate change with organizations around the world introduced her to different electoral systems. She advocates for a proportional representation ("PR") system.

She explained that there are two main "families" of electoral systems: plurality/majority based systems and proportional representation system.

She explained FPP and the alternative vote models. Her analysis is that the plurality/majority based systems are designed to create winners and losers and a culture of opposition. She said there is less incentive to collaborate. She described PR model as making everyone a winner because votes are represented in legislatures. She noted that the negatives that many people refer to about PR are that it is more complex, there are a lot of different varieties and would be a big change.

Ms. Keenan looked at the current breakdown of seats and what it would look like under PR. There would likely be more minority governments but she said that happens around the world and political parties learn to collaborate on specific measures or bills.

Regarding the different PR models, MMP, single transferable vote and dual member proportional all offer vote fairness, strong legislatures, women representation, voter participation and collaborative politics. She recommended that Canadians and the Committee determine what features are most important, namely the degree of control by voters vs. parties, simplicity, geographic representation and accountability before we evaluate the different options.

Ms. Keenan also supports the Government's resistance to having a referendum because while some people do a lot of research, for many others there are better things to do. That can lead to people not voting because they do not have an opinion. She thinks the committee process will lead to good work. Referendums are not necessarily the most effective or efficient process.

### **Mark Holland**

Mr. Holland discussed the consultation process. He said this Town Hall is only part of the conversation, as he will be having meetings all over the country. There will be a lot of opportunity for people to have input on this very important issue of modernizing our electoral system.

Mark explained that the Special Committee on Electoral Reform is not selling a particular model. They hope to get to some consensus on what is best for Canada. He said the consultation process has just begun.

Mark shared the five principles which will guide the Committee based on the motion passed in the House of Commons. He wants to hear from Canadians and Islanders about what values they are looking for in a system more than just the technical aspects.

Regarding the Committee's composition, Mark noted that this is one of the only times a majority government does not have a majority on a legislative committee. This decision will require cooperation. The hope is that they will be able to come to a consensus and focus on making the system better for the country. In the first phase they are hearing from experts after which the Committee will itself travel across Canada. There will be a digital portal for greater inclusion and engagement. The Committee will then issue a report and hopefully offer a uniquely Canadian solution based on established systems. The intention is to introduce legislation in the spring of 2017. There is a huge variety in opinion and the process will require a high level of engagement.

Outside of this process the Government is also looking at broader changes related to how we vote e.g. online voting and electronic tabulation, repealing some measures in the *Fair Elections Act* enacted by the previous government, political spending outside of elections as well as other issues.

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## **QUESTIONS & ANSWERS**

Kip Holloway asked about the low voter turnout of young people. He noted that there has been a gradual decrease since 1950. He asked how the different systems will get young people to vote and noted that if they do not then it could be a waste.

### **RESPONSES:**

- Mark Holland agreed that there has been a very concerning pattern. His opinion is that if we can get young people more engaged they will be more likely to vote. This issue is

also related to there being a clear connection between a vote and outcomes. He said it is not the case that young people are not interested it is that they don't see the connection that a vote makes a difference. He also suggested that there is a need to use technology at a deeper level.

- Anna Keenan agreed with Mark. She said it is also about the feeling that your vote isn't wasted. She also discussed the possibility of mandatory voting being adopted in Canada like in Australia.
- Jeff Collins made the point that there has been a very gradual decline in youth voter turnout. He said young people are focusing on school and jobs. He also suggested we consider dropping the voting age to 16.

Robert MacMillan raised a number of concerns about the process and decision to undertake electoral reform. He was concerned about rushing to change 150 years of history just for the sake of tweaking the system. He questioned the constitutionality of changing ridings, noted that it seemed the Government was rushing to fulfill an election promise, and he was skeptical that a change would make a difference. He also questioned whether one change would be appropriate given the diversity of Canada in terms of region and culture.

#### RESPONSES:

- Mark Holland noted that the House of Commons has studied this issue many times, the first time being in 1913. He made the point that Canada is one of only a few FPP systems in the world. He reassured Mr. MacMillan that any change would be one which has been demonstrated in other countries in the world. He said the change is not a radical shift but an improvement. The Committee will require consensus so the Liberal Party will not be making a unilateral change. In terms of the time, Mark said he thinks there is enough time and that they will not be moving forward without the buy-in of Canadians.
- Jeff Collins agreed that setting new boundaries will be a challenge. He said that the last time it was done it took years for Elections Canada to complete. He also explained how some jurisdictions have seats secured in the Constitution.
- Anna Keenan did not agree with the concern about rushing the process. She made the point that it is most important that we move forward. We cannot wait for a perfect system. She also reiterated that the fact the Government is doing this and using this process is excellent because it is a difficult issue.

An unidentified participant raised concerns about the lack of education and information available to the public. He said there are no videos or ads on television for example. He is disappointed with the lack of information and believes many people do not understand the issue and options.

#### RESPONSE:

- Mark Holland explained that it is still the beginning of the process and there will be more information and marketing starting in the fall e.g. on CBC and CTV. He said that as we get closer to decision making the issue will get more attention. They will work with third parties at arm's length from government and the Liberal Party to present information.

Leo Cheverie referred to some of the history of electoral reform including the support that Pierre Trudeau had for reform. He also referred to the Law Commission's process as being very good. He made the point that this is a very important issue. Canada is one of the only countries with FPP. He made the point that geographic representation is important but so is making every vote count. He said this could be really positive and was happy to see the engagement.

RESPONSE:

- Mark Holland noted that the geographic component is a really important founding principle because of the advocacy role which is true for all political parties.

Josh Underhay raised a concern about ranking parties in single transferrable vote or alternative vote models. He said it appears the Liberal Party would be everyone's second choice and cautioned adopting a model that would have perpetual one party government.

RESPONSES:

- Jeff Collins said that we cannot assume what second choices would be because it assumes political parties will not change. He also noted that there can still be strategic voting.
- Mark Holland explained that it is difficult to look retroactively at voting and apply the results prospectively. He reiterated that the goal is to look for something that improves the system overall.

An unidentified participant made the suggestion that if the proposal is to move to a proportional model we could have the House of Commons vote as a ranked ballot with a free vote.

Dawn Wilson with the Coalition for Women in Government made the point that 26% of MPs are women, up only one percent over the last Parliament. At that rate it would be 90 years before we achieved parity. She said she was very pleased to see the Committee adopting the principle of addressing underrepresentation. She said that equity and inclusion around gender is an important value for any new system. She asked how the Committee will evaluate models in terms of increasing representation of underrepresented groups.

RESPONSES:

- Jeff Collins noted that there are other measures to consider outside of electoral reform. For example, the New Brunswick study recommended higher vote subsidies for political parties with women candidates. He said that report may be worth looking at.
- Mark Holland noted that there are improvements, namely the first gender balanced cabinet but agreed that we have a long way to go. He also said that the electoral system alone will not solve the problem but a change can make improvements. He said that the lack of representation is a fundamental problem with democracy.

Peter Bevan Baker made the point that PEI could be a leader on this issue and adopt a reform before the federal process is concluded. He asked if Mr. Holland would endorse PR tonight. He also asked about Mr. Holland being named the most effective Opposition MP and how one can be effective in Opposition.

RESPONSE:

- Mark Holland advised that he would not endorse a particular model at this stage.
- He also said that Opposition MPs can make a difference even in the current system with a majority government. They can change debates by pushing agendas and garnering public attention and support for issues.

Sean Curley made the point that most systems would require a significant increase in the number of MPs or have a large national pool of MPs. He said there could be an increase in 100 or more MPs. The example he used was the territories which currently have only one MP.

#### RESPONSES:

- Jeff Collins said there are ways to avoid having a significant increase in the number of MPs but it may be necessary to top up the Territories.
- Mark Holland noted that there is no appetite for a 100 more MPs. He said there are a lot of ways of getting around that.

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#### **CLOSING REMARKS—WAYNE EASTER**

Wayne thanked all of the Panelists and everyone for attending. He noted that electoral reform is a huge undertaking but we cannot shy away from the challenge. He said it is about making people feel that they are part of the system and that their vote counts. He also noted that this is only one change and other broader changes are needed to improve our overall system including the committee system in the House of Commons.

Mr. Easter noted that the Prime Minister is extremely committed to giving Canadian a voice in change. The Committee is showing that by requiring collaboration with other political parties and making efforts to listen to Canadians.