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*Member of Parliament
Haldimand—Norfolk*



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

October 6, 2016

Special Committee on Electoral Reform
131 Queen St.
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Members of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform,

I would first like to thank you for allowing all MPs to make submissions to this committee, and to share the views of their constituents on electoral reform.

After the House of Commons rose for the summer, I took the opportunity to consult my constituents, not with town hall meetings, but in what I believe to be a more inclusive and broader reaching method by sending a questionnaire to every household in my constituency.

The questionnaire informed Canadians that the current government had expressed their intentions of replacing our current first-past-the-post system of electing MPs and asked the simple question of whether, before enacting a change, a referendum should be held to allow every Canadian a chance to vote on the proposed change.

Thousands of responses were received. Of these responses, 93.3 percent of respondents in Haldimand-Norfolk stated that they are in favour of holding a referendum on this issue, while only 6.6 percent of respondents felt that a referendum didn't need to be held.

The residents of Haldimand-Norfolk, whom I have been extremely privileged to represent, have made it abundantly clear that if there are changes to our democracy as fundamental as determining how our Parliaments and Governments are elected, then the decision needs to come back to the voter.

Constituency

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A Government dictating a change to our democracy that is this significant is, in my view, an erosion of our democracy itself. It lessens the legitimacy of our democracy and the freedom of all Canadians.

As the committee accepts these submissions, I also want to highlight the concerns that I have with the recommended submission form that was distributed to Members of Parliament to submit back to the committee after completing their consultations. This form is explicitly for town halls, and doesn't take into consideration other forms of outreach. In my riding, we sent out a survey to be filled out by every household because, as I stated previously, I believe it to be a broader reaching, more inclusive and more democratic way of consulting than town hall meetings or telephone town hall meetings.

Town hall meetings are held at specific times and in specific locations that may not fit with the schedules of all constituents. For instance, during the summer many families take summer vacation and leave the riding. It could also be particularly difficult for constituents of rural ridings to attend meetings held during this time because of their agricultural responsibilities. Both of these cases would prevent these constituents from voicing their opinion simply because they aren't available to attend the meeting. Town hall meetings can also discourage those people who may not be comfortable publicly voicing their views from having their parliamentarian hear their views.

As we have seen this summer, the Government's town hall meetings have not been free of political influence. According to reports, access to a town hall meeting on democratic reform in one riding was organized by the local Liberal riding association and, until opposition MPs brought attention to this, an admission cost was being charged.

While town hall meetings are one way of engaging constituents, they are, by far, an inferior way of gauging actual support or opposition to a policy position. By surveying everyone, you allow them to privately and carefully consider their view, and respond within a time frame that is convenient to them.

With this in mind, I ask that the committee accept feedback from all fora, not just feedback from town halls, as this would exclude the opinions of too many Canadians, and would not be fully representative of their views.

I urge this committee to consider the views of the constituents of Haldimand-Norfolk as they near the end of their study. Haldimand-Norfolk wants a referendum; they want a say. To decide against a referendum, when many Canadians have expressed their support for one, would be a symbolic violation of the democratic rights that we hold dear and that make this country so great.

Sincerely,



Hon. Diane Finley, P.C., M.P.
Member of Parliament for Haldimand-Norfolk