The London-Middlesex Town Hall on Electoral Reform

FINAL REPORT

Date: Sunday, September 25, 2016

Time: 1:00PM to 4:00PM

Location: King's University College *at Western University*

Members of Parliament Participating:

Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre)

Irene Mathyssen (London Fanshawe)

Karen Vecchio (Elgin-Middlesex-London)

Kate Young (London West)

On Sunday September 25, 2016, a Town Hall meeting on Electoral Reform was held in London Ontario. Local MPs Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre), Irene Mathyssen (London Fanshawe), Karen Vecchio (Elgin-Middlesex-London), and Kate Young (London West) were in attendance to hear the views of London-Middlesex citizens on our current electoral system and its potential alternatives. Over 300 participants gathered to take part in the discussion at King's University College.

The Town Hall format was non-partisan, with MPs from each of the three political parties representing London-Middlesex constituencies and an afternoon of dialogue framed by an expert presentation. The Town Hall began with a plenary session moderated by Dr. Paul Nesbitt-Larking, Professor of Political Science and Acting Dean of Huron University College, who outlined the workings of various electoral systems and the complex issues arising in translating citizen votes into legislative representation. Following a Question and Answer period, Town Hall participants proceeded to breakout groups of approximately 20 people to discuss five questions:

1. What do you think about the current system for electing Members of Parliament (benefits/flaws)? Do you feel that votes are fairly translated?

2. Do you have a preferred alternative to the current system? What specific features are important to you in an electoral system (for example local representation, proportionality, simplicity, legitimacy etc.)?

3. Why do you think many Canadians choose not to engage in the democratic process? How would you encourage participation?

4. Do you feel that it should be mandatory to cast a ballot? (Can include spoiling a ballot)

5. Should Canadians be able to vote online? Would you prefer to maintain current voting practices? (i.e. presenting oneself at a polling station, vote secrecy etc.)

To assist with the running of the Town Hall and in the spirit of non-partisan dialogue, the Huron University College Department of Political Science was enlisted. In addition to the plenary moderation and presentation by Dr. Nesbitt-Larking, Professors Neil Bradford and Lindsay Scorgie-Porter recruited and coordinated a group of 21 Huron Political Science students to serve as breakout

group facilitators and recorders. These students, known as the "Huron Civic Engagement Squad" performed their duties with enthusiasm and professionalism, as noted by a number of Town Hall participants. The students were: Emily Abbott, Jared Bulger, Jeremy Castle, Natasha Crombie, Ziyad Darwish, Brandon Dickson, Osama Farooq, Wincy Ho, Ahmed Ismail, Madison Kerr, Nikita Mathew, Kayley MacGregor, Claire McCollum, Gabriel Ndayishmiye, Kendall O'Donnell, Simon Oullette, Aliah Sakr, Joseph Scarfone, Carol Scott, Ernest Tam, and Melody Wagner.

This document, prepared by Dr. Bradford and Dr. Scorgie-Porter and based on the careful documentation from the students, synthesizes the discussion from all of the breakout groups. It captures key themes, different perspectives, and controversial issues arising over the allotted 1 hour and 50 minutes for breakout discussion. It reports on responses to the five questions and also concludes with several overarching observations about the Town Hall as an expression of community civic engagement in London-Middlesex on the question of federal electoral reform.

Feedback on the Five Questions

1. ***What do you think about the current system for electing Members of Parliament (benefits/flaws)? Do you feel that votes are fairly translated?***

Benefits

- Not perfect, but Canadians are used to it and flaws can be modified or improved not replaced
- System needs gradual improvement, is less flawed than it seems
- System produces stable governments not coalition governments (for example Italy has many parties and government instability)
- System is simple and understandable which is important, but it is also not fair to all voters or parties
- System makes all elections more local; voters have the power to elect representatives and not parties
- How do you educate Canadians about a new system that may be more complicated? Strong need for greater public or civic education about voting and electoral systems

- Democracy is a process that takes time to make major reforms like electoral system change, and a three-year window may not be enough time
- Reform debate is 'loaded" against the present system but remember the strength of relationship to local representative and ease of accountability
- Voters in 2015 election voted for the party that promised change to electoral system and there is an expectation of follow-up
- System provides fast, clear results; it's a very simple process
- Having a simple system is important; this allows for issues to be better understood, which will thereby also positively affect voter turnout
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- Concern that proportional representation fractures the electorate

Flaws

- Those not supporting major parties do not have their voices heard; voters are 'forced' to side with parties they may not fully support in order that their votes are not 'wasted'
- Many feel their votes are not properly translated into election results
- Many are not voting for who they want, but rather voting against who they do not want; this is not a high performing democratic system
- Feeling that the current system is not inclusive especially of women and minorities; another system could encourage disadvantaged groups to engage more in politics (i.e. First Nations voters)
- 'Local representation' has largely become a myth
- System encourages voters to vote on the party's platform and not really on the individual MP
- Individual MPs do not have much say and don't represent the people; instead, MPs conform to the party (the party tells the MP how to vote and represent)
- System encourages polarization of parties rather than consensus
- System encourages 'perpetual campaigning,' over governing

- Small parties have limited opportunity for winning seats; for example, the Green Party has wide support but not concentrated in one area or region so can't win in present system; this is not democratic
- Majorities can be manufactured with only mid-thirties per cent of vote
- Centralizes power in Prime Minister's office and too much local control by the political party over the nomination process to run for office
- Manufactured majorities lead to government party dominance of legislative committees
- MPs work for their parties not the people they represent and are forced to follow the "party line"; party platforms need to appeal more to citizens
- Too few people vote; if you live in a 'safe party seat' riding you're not motivated to vote due to lack of competition
- People forced to vote strategically not for their first or true choice or their conscience
- Encourages regional fragmentation when one party dominates the West, one the Maritimes and so forth; need a better mix of winning parties across regions.
- If you don't agree with a party, you have limited representation so your vote doesn't really count
- Parties don't work together, always trying to oppose each other; good legislation is overturned due to partisan change of government
- We need smaller parties to have a bigger voice; the small parties never seem to get a say in the current system, because it will always be Liberal, Conservative, or NDP parties in power
- No matter what system is decided upon, the public needs education about the system
- Changing the electoral system will allow us to align with more than one party's view (i.e. someone may be economically aligned with Conservatives, but socially aligned with NDPs)
- Whatever kind of reform is chosen, it should be implemented for one or two elections, and then there should be a referendum held to ask citizens whether they want to keep the new system or return to the previous one (that help ensure that people understand what they are being asked)

Synopsis: Overall, the majority of respondents agreed that reform to the current system is required to meet the criteria of accountability and representation. Concerns were frequently voiced about the inclusivity of the present system and the degree to which it reduced citizen engagement and voter interest. However, it was stressed that reform should not be rushed, and the process should include a strong emphasis on educating the public about the changes to occur, and the new system that will be in place.

2. *Do you have a preferred alternative to the current system? What specific features are important to you in an electoral system (for example local representation, proportionality, simplicity, legitimacy etc.)?*

- Need change to more proportional system where the popular vote is translated directly into seats; PR represents the rule of the people and is more reflective of all citizen votes
- Proportional representation represents the Canadian value of diversity and multiculturalism
- Many European democracies have a 5% threshold to ensure minority party voice heard in legislature
- Legitimacy is an important value and it requires proportionality
- Legitimacy more important than speed or simplicity,
- Proportional systems can be "overly complicated" in deciding electoral representation; Canadians want instant results when watching election night on television
- Trade-off between fast results and proportional representation?
- Minority governments can pass good legislation as in Germany; some of Canada's best legislation was passed in minority Parliaments
- Minority governments produce continuity and fewer big swings in policies after elections
- Need change to a system that encourages cooperation among parties and not constant opposition

- Ranked balloting system takes too long to decide winner and favours centrist parties on the political spectrum that are usually the second choice of most voters
- Local representation is very important and ensuring that rural areas do not feel left out; but cities have most people so individual vote can 'count less' than rural voter
- Creating a new electoral system requires careful study to ensure regional balance in proportional representation
- STV system would more accurately reflect voter preferences
- MMP system would allow citizens to have both local representative and party balance but party list system means parties have too much control and the list may not be representative of women or minorities
- MMP with an open list allows for citizen input and retain MP-citizen connection; allows for diversity and new ideas
- MMP solves the strategic voting problem and makes the vote more positive
- MMP seen to combine majorities with smaller parties still represented
- MMP lists need to be regionally based as well as open and not controlled by political parties
- Create additional seats for the top-up candidates in MMP and then abolish the Senate
- MMP is too similar to our current system; more change is needed
- MMP is not 'reform'; it is simply a minor addition to the current system
- MMP is favoured as you can vote for both your own regional MPs and the parties in general, with both ballots being heard
- STV is the most representative system
- A system which includes run-off elections would be positive
- A system whereby ballots are ranked would only strengthen the two major parties
- An open list system will give smaller parties more seats
- STV allows individuals to be closer to our MPs
- Ranked ballot system is good as it allows voters to primarily side with a smaller party if that is who they support; however, they can still vote for a larger party so that the vote 'counts'
- Ranked system is simple and easy to understand

- All systems will inevitably lead to someone feeling disenfranchised
- All systems have flaws, need time to consider options including testing out proportional representation systems at other levels of government or on regional/local pilot basis

Synopsis: Opinions on this question varied, and numerous flaws and benefits for each system were identified. There was certainly an appetite for change toward a more proportional system in translating votes into seats. While no clear preference was apparent, the MMP open list option received notable support across all the breakout groups. More generally, simplicity was an important value identified. Many respondents stressed the importance of citizens being able to understand their electoral system –a point that underscored the need for strong public education about the reform options and the strengths and weaknesses of the alternatives available.

3. *Why do you think many Canadians choose not to engage in the democratic process? How would you encourage participation?*

- People believe their votes don't matter
- People find the parties too polarized and unresponsive which reduces trust in MPs
- People are uninformed about politics and elections and don't know who to vote for; people don't know where to find information
- Canadian politics are boring (compared to the United States)
- Politicians are dishonest and negative and tend to play on the fears of the electorate
- More advanced polling dates would help
- Make voting day on weekend or a national holiday
- People do not have time to vote with work and family pressures
- Barriers to voting such as ID rules exclude homeless people and make it difficult for students
- Put more emphasis on elections and voting in civics education curriculum (public and high schools)

- Lower the voting age to 16 to establish lifetime voting habit
- MPs need to consult more with citizens and better understand their problems
- If citizens think the MPs are listening to them, they will be motivated to participate in the process; MPs need to do more outreach to different communities
- Need to communicate about elections and voting in plain language that all citizens can understand
- Add political party summaries on the ballot
- Parents should teach their children the responsibility to vote and encourage them to participate
- Media needs to present factual and unbiased information on elections and voting
- Elections Canada needs a communications department without bias sending information to Canadians
- Need to increase the role of Elections Canada in encouraging greater voter turn out
- Young people need to be taught that 'politics matters' – not just the voting process but the policy outcomes – make it more personal to participate
- Create a tax credit for voting
- Some people don't understand the ballot and accidently spoil their ballot
- Need more Town Halls and MP contact with citizens to increase confidence and interest
- Address issues of non-resident Canadian voter rights
- Need some kind of specific website where Canadians can learn about all the different electoral systems; there is a lack of knowledge and understanding
- Voting is not a practice that is 'ingrained' in the Canadian identity and political culture
- No matter what efforts are made, there will simply always be a percentage of the population that does not care about politics or engage in the process
- Needs to be more comprehensive teaching in the school systems of the voting process and importance of voting to engage people young in politics (well before they are of voting age)
- Bottom line is that voting needs to be more accessible and inclusive

Synopsis: Prominent themes focused on ways to better engage citizens in politics and voting. Many participants agreed lowering the voting age would help create life-long voting habits and engagement with politics. A broad cultural change seems to be required involving more civic education through ongoing provision of unbiased, uncomplicated information about both the electoral system, the importance of voting, and the political parties, as well as more teaching in elementary and secondary schools of politics, elections and their importance for public policy and the quality of life in Canada. These steps could help restore trust in the political system and motivate greater citizen participation

4. ***Do you feel that it should be mandatory to cast a ballot? (Can include spoiling a ballot)***

No

- Forcing a free citizen of Canada to vote is wrong; individuals should make their own choice
- Encourages uninformed voting, raising legitimacy issues for the outcome
- Encourages spoiled ballots
- Ballot should have "none of the above" option
- Right to vote includes right not to vote; should not penalize people for not exercising a right
- Use incentives such as tax credits to encourage people to vote (so incentives to vote should be focused on, rather than making voting mandatory)
- Could violate treaty rights for First Nations
- Would create very long line-ups
- Not in the Canadian political tradition to force people to vote
- MPs should be giving people a positive reason to vote
- Whole point of democracy is freedom to choose, and this includes voting
- Could be difficult to enforce compliance with such a mandatory measure

Yes

- Use fines to enforce although this could be complicated and expensive

- Will get people to the voting station and then change the culture and create better awareness of voting's importance
- Has been proven effective in other countries
- Yes, so long as there was a 'voting day' (statutory holiday) that would make this feasible
- Yes, but the bigger issue is mandatory registration
- Would allow for a more diverse and accurate outcome
- The unacceptably low voter turnout to Canadian elections simply requires this

Further thoughts

- Find ways to encourage people and make them want to cast a vote
- Further research needed on why people don't vote (eg. Homelessness, disabilities, lack of time etc.)
- People should be made aware that spoiled ballots provide valuable data
- Attention needs to be paid to those employers that discourage their employees from taking the time to vote
- There should be synchronized voting: federal, provincial, and municipal elections should all be held at once

Synopsis: While there were some participants in favor of mandatory voting, the overwhelming view was opposition to this idea. Numerous concerns were raised, notably that mandatory voting is 'undemocratic' and not in the Canadian political tradition where citizens have the right to choose whether to engage in the voting process. Others expressed concern about the rise of uninformed voting that a mandatory system would bring and the difficulty of enforcing such a law.

5. *Should Canadians be able to vote online? Would you prefer to maintain current voting practices? (i.e. presenting oneself at a polling station, vote secrecy etc.)*

- Yes, it could be easily done and it would encourage participation; younger people comfortable with technology would be most impacted

- Yes, it could save money and broaden participation
- Yes, so long as adequate safeguards are taken
- Yes, but only for areas that are extremely remote and inaccessible
- Yes, but this should be implemented gradually (i.e. first start with giving citizens a choice to vote physically or online in the next election, and then gradually move to a situation where only online voting is left)
- Need to be aware of those Canadians without internet access or computer familiarity
- Elections Canada portal could present information on all the candidates in each riding
- Optimal system would retain traditional voting station and combine on-line option
- Test-out online system in small areas that have difficulty with in-person voting and fix problems and then expand the online option
- Concerns about security and privacy of system and technical breakdowns
- Concerns about how online elections can be scrutinized and voter fraud avoided
- Concerns about online voting limiting civic responsibility
- Concerns about one family member influencing others to vote for a particular party (study was referenced showing that more husbands than wives saying they vote as a 'household')
- Concerns about voter confidentiality
- Concerns about foreign governments hacking into system
- Voting stations need to be more convenient for citizens, for example on university and college campuses
- Need better transit to voting stations for people with disabilities
- Canadian voting practices are admired worldwide and Canadians asked to supervise elections elsewhere
- A compromise would be mail-in voting
- There would need to be thorough testing of an online system before it is implemented nationally

Synopsis: While participants were overall divided on whether future voting systems should be online, there were a great many concerns raised (even from

many of those in favor). The potential for breaches in voter confidentiality was a comment raised by numerous participants amid general concern about the security of online voting. Many also appeared concerned about the potential for technical glitches and breakdowns. Finally, questions over accessibility (i.e. for those unfamiliar with using computers, or without access to computers) were frequently raised. However, some participants saw online voting as a strategy to engage young people in political life.

Other issues arising …

Reflecting the richness of the breakout group discussions, there were several issues raised that do not fit logically within the five set questions. Below are some of the prominent 'other issues' including the use of a referendum as a decision-making mechanism.

- Referendum – problem as citizens don't understand complex issues
- Referendum – can silence minority voices and concerns
- Referendum – yes-no vote can leave aside many other ideas
- Referendum – Canadians elect representatives to make decisions; they should present choice to citizens
- Referendum – results would not be accurate due to the fear mongering that would inevitably take place
- Referendum – people have little deep understanding of the question they are being asked to decide
- Referendum – BREXIT is a good example of how dangerous referendums can be
- Referendum – consider only after a new electoral system has been tested-out
- Referendum – people should be directly asked about electoral reform option because it is central to Canadian democracy
- Ontario and British Columbia had a referendum for whether provincial governments should have electoral reform; thus, there is some experience with this mechanism
- "Media saturation" of unbiased educational materials on what electoral reform means and what the options for change are

- Town Halls similar to this one organized by all-party London area MPs are very useful for engaging the public and working together
- Grassroots viewpoints are not sufficiently heard in politics; the three main parties close-off debate
- Canadians don't understand the differences between federal, provincial, municipal elections
- Campaign financing and the role of money in established parties is a problem
- Canadian Senate should be abolished
- Limit the influence of large corporations in political life
- Need Parliamentary reform more than electoral reform to force MPs to be more representative of their constituents' wishes not their political party; omnibus bills are not transparent government
- The Parliamentary Committee should make a decision and then educate the public about the choice and why it is best and how the system will work
- This Town Hall needed to be far better advertised and communicated to the public; due to the limited advertising, its results are not a fair representation of the public's opinions
- The outcomes of this Town Hall should be shared with the London Free Press and other media outlets, so that the public can have an idea of the consensus on these issues in this particular region
- CBC needs to be reformed; it does a poor job of informing Canadians about the political process; does a poor job of providing equal exposure to all political points of view

Closing Reflections on the London-Middlesex Town Hall

1. The 300 or so participants who chose to attend the Town Hall on a beautiful Sunday afternoon were clearly highly motivated to discuss issues of federal electoral reform. Both the plenary session and the breakout groups were notable for their engagement and enthusiasm. Participants were passionate about the issues and options and ready for substantive, respectful community-based dialogue. It was also evident that many of these citizens were knowledgeable about electoral reform and had thought about and/or

researched the various systems.   There was broad consensus around "accountability and representation" as the foundations of a high-performing electoral system. Debate was spirited about whether and how different models could best deliver on these principles.   The Town Hall was an example of local democracy in action, with citizens and MPs working together on an issue of national consequence. Some participants felt that more advance publicity and advertising of the Town Hall would have increased participation even further.

2. It is clear that a substantial majority of Town Hall participants had a strong desire to see electoral reform. However, this was matched by awareness of the complexity of changing the electoral system and the challenges in achieving consensus on a system that more accurately translates voter intentions into legislative seats than the present system.   Many participants made the point that electoral reform should not be rushed. The general advice to MPs seemed to be to proceed through careful study of the alternatives; non-partisan, fact-based public education about the options; and ongoing consultation with citizens about potential reforms and how to select and implement a system that balances better representation of voters with greater accountability for politicians. In this spirit of learning, several participants suggested that a referendum on the chosen electoral system alternative might be held in the future after Canadians had practical experience with the change through several elections.

3. While the non-partisan, fact-based Town Hall approach was appreciated by participants, it seems many citizens in London-Middlesex are frustrated with aspects of the existing Canadian political system, including the electoral system but also beyond. Across the breakout groups, specific concerns were voiced about the workings of political parties – that MPs are bound by party discipline to "follow the party line" and therefore able to fully represent the views and aspirations of their constituents. There was the sense that electoral reform needs to be accompanied by other changes to the political parties making them more accountable, representative, and constructive in working together to solve both national policy problems and address specific concerns of their local constituents. Electoral reform was often positioned as one important piece of a larger process of change required to strengthen Canadian democracy.

4. A final overarching theme emerging through the breakout groups was that the process of deciding electoral reform itself could lead to greater political participation by Canadians. This theme addressed positive changes in the broader Canadian political culture. An issue such as electoral reform that speaks to fundamental questions about the workings of democracy presents an excellent opportunity for thoughtful civic dialogue and public input into political decision-making.   Further, it was observed that once a new electoral system was in place that was more representative and accountable then citizens might well become more 'self-motivated' to vote and participate, making questions about mandatory voting or spoiled ballots less relevant to the Canadian political process.