

Sherwood Park – Fort Saskatchewan Roundtable Discussions on Prospective Changes to Canada's Electoral System

On September 10th, 2016, the Office of Garnett Genuis, MP hosted four open roundtable discussions for constituents on the topic of electoral reform. These were not organized with any third party group – they were opportunities for constituents to share their own perspectives with each other, with their MP, and by extension with Parliamentarians and Canadians.

Discussions were structured organically, and different points of emphasis in different roundtables reflected the particular interests and priorities of those who attended each one. It should be noted, however, that these organic discussions generally gravitated toward two overarching themes. The first theme focussed on which of two main options would be better as an electoral system – the status quo, or a somewhat more proportional system. The second theme was the process which we should use to deliberate and decide about prospective changes to our electoral system. This summary note discusses each of those two issues, and then mentions some of the other separate points that were raised by one or more of the roundtable participants.

Theme #1: Should Canada maintain the current system, or should we move to a somewhat more proportional representation-based system (PR)?

- There was virtually no interest in moving to an instant runoff system. This system was described as a less proportional system. One participant, who favoured PR, suggested that proposals for instant runoff looked like a trick by the government in order to claim that they had changed the system, without bringing in 'real electoral reform'. In the first roundtable, we had one participant make a strong case for instant runoff, but in most of the roundtables nobody spoke up in favour of that system, despite explicitly being asked if there was anyone present who wanted to do so.
- There appeared to be a strong consensus throughout the roundtable discussions that we do not want a new system which ends up strengthening partisanship. There appeared to be no interest in models of PR which involved parties independently drawing up lists, for example.
- Those who wanted change to the status quo almost all advocated for a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system, with a threshold, and which did not give full discretion to parties to draw up their own lists. Two different models for constructing party lists were proposed. One model involved having an open list, without a suggested ranking. In response to concerns that such a list might be too long for voters to know about every candidate on the list, it was noted by one roundtable participant that open lists could be regional, and the proportional top-up involve allocation from different regional lists. A second model was one in which the party list would be automatically drawn up based on the percentage of the popular vote received by defeated riding-level candidates in the same election.

- There wasn't a specific consensus evident as to whether the MMP system used should have voters mark two separate votes (one for the party and one for the local candidate), or whether it should simply count the local vote as the party vote as well. However concerns were raised about 'gaming the system' under MMP, that likely relate to potential consequences of the two-vote option.
- Advocates of the status quo raised the idea that our current system has fostered stable government and helped our country become the success that it is. They suggested that our analysis should not simply look at the electoral system in the abstract, but should consider the positive status of our country and how our current electoral system may have contributed to it. From their perspective, why change what isn't broken?
- Advocates of the status quo worried that a more proportional system would create instability and perpetual minority governments, and give fringe parties and movements the opportunity to gain undeserved representation in the House of Commons. These ideas were raised by some, and contested by others.
- Advocates of MMP argued that their preferred system would increase voter turnout and engagement, and encourage open discussion and teamwork in legislative process. These ideas were raised by some, and contested by others.
- Roundtable participants were fairly evenly split between MMP advocates and advocates of the status quo.

Theme #2: What process should we use to deliberate and decide about prospective changes to our electoral system?

- Throughout our roundtables, there was strong (though not unanimous) support for ensuring that the public had the opportunity to decide on changes to our electoral system directly through a referendum.
- Some opponents of a referendum argued that the electorate is not educated or aware enough to understand the nuances of proposed change, and that MPs are best positioned to dedicate the necessary amount of time to research for informed decision making. Supporters of a referendum countered that MPs are not necessarily experts on this topic, and that MPs will likely vote in a biased or predetermined manner – either along party lines or in accordance to their own partisan or personal interest, given that their jobs may depend on the outcome.
- Consensus generally was that any vote on this issue in the House of Commons, whether preceding a referendum or not, ought to be a genuinely free vote. However, it was also noted that MPs would likely not be truly free to vote their own views on an issue this important, even if the vote was officially labelled 'free'. One roundtable participant suggested that a vote be held via secret ballot – although others raised the concern that this would run counter to proper democratic accountability.

- There was some discussion about the prospective cost of a referendum. On this point, there were three distinct positions. Some felt that a referendum was not worth the cost, and therefore should not happen. Some felt that a referendum on something so fundamental to our electoral system was worth the cost, and that a stand-alone referendum was important to ensure that the question gets the level of attention and public scrutiny that it deserves. A third group wanted to see a referendum, but believed that it should be held concurrently with a federal election, keeping costs as low as possible. While a clear majority favoured referendum, it was not clear whether a stand-alone referendum or a referendum concurrent with a federal election would be preferred.
- The consensus was that a referendum...
 - Needs to be a choice between two options, and the wording needs to be clear, unbiased, and simple.
 - Requires that people receive information about the potential changes, and that both sides are fairly represented in the process of educating the public.

Additional Points Raised

- A few participants raised the issue of online voting, and felt that it was a viable option, provided the necessary safeguards are put in place.
- The issue of allowing certain non-citizens to vote was raised at one of the roundtables; however, the strong consensus was that citizenship should remain a requirement for voting.

MP Note:

It was striking to me that those who opposed a referendum were generally also advocates of a more PR-based system. (Although the inverse was not true – many supporters of electoral changes were also supportive or neutral on a referendum). Advocates of a more proportional system defended their approach on the basis of an alleged prospective increase in voter engagement and the supposed need for our electoral system to adhere to public sentiment in a more strictly proportionate way. And yet opponents of a referendum suggest that proposed electoral changes are too complex for the public to rule on. It struck me that those who oppose a referendum yet support a more supposedly proportionate electoral system are incapable of reconciling these two arguments – that we need a system that allegedly better reflects the desires of voters on the one hand, but that voters can allegedly not be trusted to make decisions on complex issues. You either trust the voters or you don't. In my view, a decision about tinkering with Canada's electoral system should not be exclusively left to the devices of just those parliamentarians and parties currently in office who stand to benefit from any such changes. We need a referendum so that Canadians can decide.