

**Submission to the House of Commons Special
Committee on Electoral Reform**

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Prince Edward Island

INTRODUCTION

The House of Commons Committee on Electoral Reform has been tasked by the House of Commons to conduct a study on electoral reform in Canada, including examining alternative voting methods and ways to restore the effectiveness and legitimacy of voting in Canada, encouraging greater participation and engagement in the democratic process, supporting the accessibility and inclusiveness of all voters, safeguarding the integrity of the voting process, and preserving the accountability of local representation.

As the Member of Parliament for Cardigan, I felt it was vital to add the voices of people in my Riding to the mix. I was proud to host a Community Roundtable on Electoral Reform on October 13, 2016 in Uigg, P.E.I.

I am proud to submit this Report to the Committee containing information about the event and the feedback that was received from my constituents. My hope is to add their ideas and concerns to the national dialogue on electoral reform and I trust that the Committee will take into account their comments and suggestions.

Community Roundtable on Electoral Reform

Date: Thursday, October 13, 2016

Location: Uigg Community Centre

Uigg, PE

Hosted by: Lawrence MacAulay, MP for Cardigan

Attendance: 25 constituents

To help generate discussion, each constituent was provided with a list of questions, which placed a focus on the following:

- 1. What do you think could be done to help Canadians feel more involved and interested in democracy?*
- 2. Do you feel the current system of First Past the Post works well? Would you prefer another system of voting in Canada and, if so, why?*
- 3. How do you feel about electronic voting, online voting and mandatory voting and why?*
- 4. How do we help increase voter turnout and make Canadians more interested and engaged in the voting process?*
- 5. Do you feel that there are any barriers that Canadians face when voting? If so, what are they and what do you think could be done to overcome them?*

MP Lawrence MacAulay opened the discussion by providing an introductory speech thanking everyone for attending, explaining the current ongoing national dialogue regarding electoral reform and the study being conducted by the House of Commons Committee on Electoral Reform. He gave an overview of several voting systems and how they work, including First Past the Post, Proportional Representation, and Preferential Voting. He emphasized how important it is to make people feel involved in the democratic process and to retain a strong democratic system and that it's vital to always look at possible ways to make our democracy better and to involve people in these discussions. He then opened the discussion to the floor, asking participants to share their thoughts in relation to the questions provided.

Participants spoke strongly in favour of the current First Past the Post system of voting, the importance of its simplicity for everyone to understand and of providing stable governments and legislative representation.

Comments received were that Canada has been a democracy with 150 years of First Past the Post which has served the country well and contributed to the greatest democracy in the world. People understand the current system, while other options seem overly complicated and can be difficult to grasp, especially some of the Proportional Representation options. Participants noted that there is currently a provincial electoral reform dialogue happening, with a plebiscite coming up in the near future.

Participants spoke strongly in favour of having strong governments which are able to accomplish their goals, and that while minority governments can definitely have benefits of moderating governments and promoting more cooperation, there are also benefits to a government having more control over its agenda.

There was more positive discussion around preferential voting and there were several comments that this system seemed easier to understand, and having candidates each receive at least 50 percent of the vote made sense. Participants like the idea of being able to rank their preferences on their ballot and that their choices would contribute to the winner of the election, even if their first choice may not necessarily win.

Several participants noted that issues with voter turnout and engagement in Canada are not endemic to the First Past the Post system, as Prince Edward Island tends to have some of the highest voter turnout in the country with the First Past the Post system. Changing the voting system will not necessarily get more Canadians involved in the process in and of itself, and in

fact, if the system is changed, Canadians could then decide that they aren't happy with the new system when they see its practical application in use— participants urged caution in this regard.

Discussion then turned toward engaging and involving more Canadians in the democratic process. Participants felt that the best ways to do this may not necessarily be to change the voting system dramatically, but to try to address issues such as transportation, accessibility, language barriers for some new Canadian citizens, offer more promotion, advertising and education surrounding the voting process and Canadian democracy and public institutions more generally, and that society in general has a role to play to help address barriers, not only governments. In smaller communities, people tend to spend more time talking about elections and voting, which is something that could help inspire greater voter turnout and something which may not be the same in larger communities. An emphasis was placed on having a connection to the local representative, whether federal or provincial, and that citizens must feel like they have access to their representative and that their voices will be heard.

Participants also discussed mandatory, electronic and online voting and whether these could help increase the engagement of Canadians in the voting process. The consensus was negative surrounding the option of mandatory voting, with comments received that voting is a right and a privilege but not something which should be forced on citizens by their governments. Comments on electronic voting centred around the last provincial election in New Brunswick and how the electronic voting system used during that election resulted in significant delays and problems. There was no support for pursuing that option in the near future, and participants like the physical feature of marking an 'X' on their ballots. There was further discussion regarding online voting and participants spoke of several pros and cons. These included the fact that many people may not have the internet or a computer, and that it could disadvantage people in rural or remote communities and people with lower incomes. However, discussion also focused on the fact that there are changing demographics in Canada, and having the option of online voting may help increase voter turnout and engagement among young Canadians now and into the future. This option could also help people with mobility issues who have trouble getting to the polls and people who may live further away from their poll or who could be away or working when the polls are open. The consensus was that this could be a good option to at least explore further but participants would like to see more information about how exactly it would work and have assurance that it would protect the integrity and security of the voting process.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the citizens of Cardigan who participated in this Community Roundtable on Electoral Reform felt strongly about the democratic process and the strength and pride they have in our democratic system. There was a strong recommendation to keep the current First Past the Post System, but if that anything were to change, participants would be open to a Preferential Voting system. There was a consensus that Proportional Representation was not the desired choice and would be too confusing as well as possibly contributing to unstable governments and more frequent elections. There were no positive comments received regarding proportional representation voting systems.

Participants emphasized that increasing the engagement and inclusion of more Canadians into the voting process should be the underlying goal of any changes and that changing the system of voting may not necessarily be the most effective way of doing so. Increasing and emphasizing education, as well as promoting the voting process, our democracy and public institutions more would contribute to this goal. Canadians must also feel more connected to their local representative which is more of a challenge in larger communities with higher populations. Each and every person must be able to feel a connection in some way and feel that their voice can be heard. Options such as online voting may also contribute, but should be examined very carefully. Participants were grateful for the opportunity to have their concerns heard and to be able to participate in the national dialogue on electoral reform, saying that we have the greatest country and greatest democracy in the world and examining ways to improve is always positive and they were hopeful that their discussion and the Committee's study will lead to an improved democracy in Canada.