

TOWN HALL REPORT ON ELECTORAL REFORM

EGLINTON-LAWRENCE

October 10, 2016

OVERVIEW

On September 25, 2016, a Town Hall was held at the Barbara Frum Library from 10:30 am to 12:30 pm in the Toronto riding of Eglinton-Lawrence. The event was facilitated by Kalman Green and Barry Green, two local residents of the riding. Approximately 45 people from the riding attended along with the local MP, Marco Mendocino.

The purpose of the Town Hall was to educate the attendees on the five most common voting systems used around the world. After an introduction by Marco Mendocino where he explained the context and timetable of this current initiative by the Government and the principles and key components of an electoral system, the audience was invited to vote on whether they were in favour of keeping the First Past the Post system or preferred to consider a different system. See the appendix for the vote tally.

The facilitators then gave a brief explanation of the five different systems which are:

- First past the post
- Alternative voting
- Proportional representation
- Single transferable vote
- Mixed member proportional

A brief question period followed and then at six different table groups, the participants discussed and recorded the pros and cons of each system. At the end of this discussion, a second vote was held to see which system people preferred. See the appendix for the results of the second vote.

The pros and cons that each table group prepared have been collected and are listed below.

The session was set up to specifically address the voting systems, so did not address the following:

- On-line voting
- Mandatory voting

- Voter engagement
- Lowering the voting age
- Referendum

At the end of the session, participants were invited to complete a feedback form which discussed a number of other issues besides the voting methods, including the ones noted above that were specifically excluded from the group discussion. A summary of the main themes that emerged from these feedback forms is also explained below.

SUMMARY OF PROS AND CONS

First Past the Post:

Pros

- Local representation; vote for a local representative
- Avoids party lists
- Leads to more majority governments; stable
- Familiar, simple, easy to administer
- Retains existing riding boundaries
- Quick

Cons

- Does not reflect popular vote and is therefore perceived as unfair since losing votes have no representation
- Some ridings are not competitive as one party has retained the seat through many elections, can therefore discourage participation
- The possibility of vote splitting can lead to strategic voting
- False majorities
- Can contribute to a more adversarial environment
- Creates a tension between the party and the candidate
- Encourages representatives to move towards the political centre

Alternative Voting:

Pros

- Vote only once
- Local representation

- Only a slight modification from the existing method, simple and not complicated
- Reduces risk of vote splitting
- Represents a consensus choice, good to allow a vote for a second choice candidate
- Second choice candidate may represent a compromise
- Prevents extreme parties
- Retains existing riding boundaries
- Simple transition from the existing system
- Gives better recognition of preferences

Cons

- More complex
- Still not proportional
- The candidate with the most first place votes may not get elected
- Voters may not actually know who got their vote
- Results could be more distorted than under FPTP
- Voters may not be well informed about other or minor candidates
- Although it may work well for a leadership convention where there are opportunities for additional discussions, it may not work for a whole country
- Not every party is represented
- Larger parties are likely to gain more support
- Encourages voters to move more to the political centre

Proportional Representation:

Pros

- More accurately reflects the percentage of votes received by the parties (e.g. Green Party received 600,000 votes and only 1 seat compared to approximately 12 under PR)
- Better representation for smaller parties
- Voters will vote for the party
- Voting will be more based on the big picture
- On an open list, voters will still be voting for individual candidates and therefore the candidates are likely to be well informed individuals
- Every vote counts
- Creation of the list can better reflect the diversity of the country

Cons

- No local candidates, no local offices

- The lists result in an over-centralization in the party headquarters, may not account for local concerns and with a closed list would lack transparency
- Voters would not choose the candidates
- Would tend to result in more power to the cities as opposed to rural areas
- Can allow for more parties and small fringe parties (would need a high threshold for (at least 5%) for entry into Parliament)
- MP loyalty would be to the party only
- Likely to result in minority/coalition governments, tends to result in unstable governments
- Would this methodology be consistent with constitutional guarantees (e.g. 4 seats guaranteed for P.E.I.)
- Most confusing option

Single Transferrable Vote:

Pros

- Proportionality on a regional level through preferences
- Local representation, more representation of electorate wishes
- Better ranking
- Lots of voices allows constituents to approach a choice of parties, better champions
- More diversity of representation
- Good system if you understand it
- Could favour more independent candidates (through 2nd place votes)
- Every vote counts if “excess” votes are redistributed

Cons

- Complex, opaque process, takes a long time to count the ballots
- Weaker local representation than FPTP
- More suitable for non-party candidates
- Still need 50% to reach the quota
- Individual parties may have candidates competing against each other
- Gridlock
- Ridings may be very large, the process of creating the new ridings will be difficult
- People can't choose their government

Mixed Member Proportional:

Pros

- Better local representation
- Closer to the current system
- Party representative plus local representative
- Gives opposition more of a vote
- Proportional
- Strategic voting less of an issue

Cons

- Costs of increasing the size of the House of Commons
- Candidates rejected by the voters may still get into the House if the list is comprised of the “best losers”
- Includes all the cons of PR
- Coalition governments
- No ranked ballot
- More difficult to understand
- Mixes worst features of both systems
- Leads to “Party Hacks” under the closed list system

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK FORMS

Feedback forms on the session were distributed at the end and were completed by 34 participants. Although respondents commented on many different issues, the main themes that emerged were:

- Before any change to the voting system is contemplated, a massive public education campaign needs to be undertaken. Many of the voting systems are complex and require time to be understood. The implications of each voting system also need to be explained with regard to how they would affect voters, candidates and parties.
- Voters are discouraged with the current system that accounts, in part, for the lower popular vote over the last few decades. There is much cynicism and youth, especially, feel disengaged. People do not necessarily see their voting choices reflected in the House of Commons and often feel like their vote has been wasted. The current system encourages strategic voting as opposed to voting for the candidate you truly want to see elected.

- Civics classes in school that explain our form of government and our voting methods need to be bolstered to give youth a basic understanding of how our Parliament works.
- For election results to be more representative, greater outreach needs to be done to ensure that elections are inclusive of the diversity of our country. Special attention needs to be paid to groups that may not historically have been active and/or voted in elections, such as indigenous peoples, minority groups, new Canadians, the disabled, and youth.
- On whether voting should be mandatory, the results were mixed. 16 people said they would prefer voting to be mandatory with many saying incentives (e.g. tax incentives) should be offered to people that voted. However, there was a strong view that people should not be fined for not voting which is the case in a number of other countries that have adopted mandatory voting. 12 people said they were not in favour of mandatory voting.
- On whether voting should be allowed on-line, the results were also mixed. 17 people said they were in favour, but only if strong safeguards were put in place to ensure the system could not be hacked. 12 people were not in favour of on-line voting.
- A few people commented on the use of a referendum to decide which voting method should be adopted. Only one person said the Government should not have the authority to change the voting system on their own. Four others thought that the Government should decide as they would be the most knowledgeable people on a very complex issue and the citizenry had elected them to make these types of decisions. Some believed that if a referendum is to be used, it should only be done after an election has occurred using an alternate method, and only after some time has passed having used this new voting method.
- The prevailing view was that this entire initiative is a “work in progress” that should be thought through carefully, with great effort spent on public awareness and consultation before any decisions are made regarding a new voting method. A rushed timetable would not serve this purpose.

CONCLUSIONS

1. In the timeframe available prior to the next election, it is very unlikely that we could achieve a “broad consensus” on the need to replace FPTP.
2. It is even less likely that consensus could be achieved on the best alternative with which to replace it.
3. A referendum, especially with multiple alternatives, is unlikely to result in a replacement for FPTP
4. Any initiative to replace FPTP without a referendum is likely to be characterized by many as undemocratic

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Legislation proposed to the House as a result of the Committee’s work should require that the 2019 election be carried out under FPTP, but that Elections Canada be instructed to conduct the election in a manner that would allow the votes to be counted using 1 or more alternative procedures. Publicity prior to the election should also educate the voters on the alternatives and how the results from the alternative voting procedures will be used.
2. Following the election, the official results of which will be determined based on FPTP, the alternative results, using the alternative procedures specified, would be broadly disseminated, for illustrative purposes only.
3. Prior to the following election, in 2023 or earlier, the Government elected in 2019 shall use the illustrative results from the alternative procedures, to continue the dialogue with the Canadian public and determine, by referendum or otherwise, the most appropriate procedure to use for that election.

Rationale for the Recommendations

Kalman and Barry, the facilitators, recognize that the attendees at our Town Hall were not representative of the Canadian public at large, or indeed of Eglinton-Lawrence. Compared to the public at large, they were unusually engaged in this issue and likely, even at the beginning of the session, better informed on the alternatives. Even so, 41% at the beginning of the session and 34% at the end, still believed that FPTP was the best alternative. The feedback also indicated that there was a great deal of confusion about the alternatives, including the pros and cons of each, and concern about the methodology by which any alternative might be chosen, i.e. with or without a referendum.

We believe therefore that the best mechanism by which to achieve a consensus for change would be to follow a procedure similar to what we did at the Town Hall, but on an expanded

scale. The next election could be used as a “laboratory” to educate the electorate and experiment with alternatives to allow voters to become more comfortable with them, while retaining the First Past the Post methodology for one more election. The recommendation therefore is that prior to the 2019 election, an education campaign be designed, by Elections Canada, to inform voters about a number of alternatives under consideration. This public education campaign needs to be broad-based and inclusive, targeting in particular indigenous groups, new immigrants, youth, faith communities and other social groups so that audiences for this education campaign reflect the diversity of our country. Social media, MP Town Halls, school initiatives and community outreach should all be considered in mounting such a public education campaign.

During the election, voting would be conducted in such a manner that results could be published under these alternative methodologies. Following the election, a further public consultation process should be carried out, with real information available on the impacts of alternative methodologies, and ideally the “broad consensus” that is sought by all, might be achieved.

In addition, the Provinces might be invited to share in the development of the alternatives and/or the analysis of the results such that they might also support any recommended change. It would also provide an opportunity for them to use these results to consider and perhaps implement an alternative voting system within their jurisdictions.

APPENDIX

Polling results from the September 25th Town Hall on Electoral Reform

Pre-discussion vote:

Retain First Past the Post (FPTP)..... 41 %

Change from First Past the Post (FPTP)..... 59 %

Post Discussion Balloting:

	FPTP	AV	PR	STV	MMP
Table A	0	1	1	0	5
Table B	2	0	2	0	2
Table C	2	3	1	1	0
Table D	6	0	0	0	0
Table E	0	3	0	1	1
Table F	3	2	0	1	1

Results:

Counting based on Proportional Representation:

FPTP 34%

AV 24%

PR 11%

STV 8%

MMP 24%

Counting using an Alternate Vote:

	Count No. 1	Count No. 2	Count No. 3	Count No. 4
FPTP	13	14	14	18
AV	9	9	10	Delete
PR	4	4	Delete	Delete
STV	3	Delete	Delete	Delete
MMP	9	11	15	18

The results were also tabulated in an alternative way. We assumed that each Table represented a “riding” and each polling alternative represented a political party, the results were again tabulated using FPTP or AV

Under a FPTP methodology:

Tables D and F voted for FPTP

Tables C and E voted for AV

Table A voted for MMP

Table B’s vote was split equally between FPTP, PR and MMP

Therefore our “parliament” would have:

- 2 seats held by the FPTP party
- 2 seats held by the AV party and
- 1 seat held by the MMP party

Under an AV methodology:

On the initial ballot:

- Table A voted for MMP
- Table B had a split vote and no “party” could be eliminated
- Table D voted for FPTP
- Table E voted for AV
- Table C and F required supplemental counts

Table C:

	Count 1	Count 2
FPTP	2	3
AV	3	4
PR	1	Delete
STV	1	Delete
MMP	0	delete

Therefore Table C voted for AV

Table F:

	Count 1	Count 2
FPTP	3	4
AV	2	3
PR	0	Deleted
STV	1	Deleted
MMP	1	Deleted

Therefore Table F voted for FPTP

Therefore our “parliament” would have:

- 2 seats held by the FPTP party
- 2 seats held by the AV party and
- 1 seat held by the MMP party

CONCLUSIONS

- Following discussion, the percentage wanting to retain FPTP dropped from 41% to 34%
- FPTP remained the most popular alternative, with MMP and AV tied for second, 10 percentage points behind
- If we counted the voting preference using an AV methodology, the most popular alternative was a tie between FPTP and MMP
- The ballots were also counted under the assumption that each of the 6 tables represented a riding and each alternative was a party. Under this approach, counting based on FPTP or AV the results were:
 - 2 seats for the FPTP party
 - 2 seats for the AV party and
 - 1 seat for the MMP party
 - 1 Table cast 2 votes for each of 3 parties, so their “seat” was not assigned.