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John Nater, MP
Perth—Wellington

October 14, 2016

Christine Lafrance and Danielle Widmer
Clerks of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Sent by e-mail to erre@parl.gc.ca

Dear Clerks:

Enclosed, please find my submission to the House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform in accordance with the resolution agreed to by the committee on July 28, 2016.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John Nater".

John Nater, M.P.
Perth—Wellington

Submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

John Nater, M.P. Perth--Wellington

Report on Town Hall and Other Consultations on Electoral Reform in Perth—Wellington

Introduction

Over the past four months, I have consulted my constituents on the issue of Electoral Reform. These consultations included hosting a Democracy Town Hall, an electoral reform response card in my September Newsletter, and hearing from my constituents at community events, through e-mail, and on social media.

Throughout this process I heard a wide variety of views, ideas and values. From these consultations a number of themes emerged. First, the vast majority of people in Perth—Wellington believe any significant changes to Canada's electoral system must be approved by the people of Canada in a national referendum. Second, there is considerable concern about disengagement in politics. Third, most people in Perth—Wellington consider it very important to maintain a recognizable local representative

When the national discussion on electoral reform began last spring, I noticed I was hearing very little from my constituents on the issue. Although there were a few phone call and e-mails on this topic, the vast majority of the communication I received continued to be related to jobs, taxes, infrastructure and agriculture.

Democracy Town Hall

On September 6th, I held a Democracy Town Hall in Atwood from 7:00-8:30 p.m. The location was selected based on geography as Atwood is at the near centre of Perth—Wellington and is easily accessible as it lies on a major highway. The date was selected based on a variety of factors including the availability of an impartial expert on the topic, the availability and affordability of hall space, and the likelihood that most constituents would have completed any summer travel. Sixty-one people attended the event (not including the speakers and three of my staff).

In order to avoid misunderstandings about different types of electoral systems I began the meeting with a presentation by a non-partisan expert from Brock University. This was followed by brief presentations by representatives of the local electoral district associations registered with Elections Canada.

The Candidate of Record for the Christian Heritage Party in the 2015 election argued in favour of Proportional Representation in some form. She also felt that Senators should be chosen by their provinces not by the Prime Minister.

A representative from the New Democratic Party Electoral District Association argued that a majority of votes should be required to earn a majority of the seats. She also expressed her desire for a system that discourages strategic voting and stated she also favours Proportional Representation in some form. However, she did not offer any details as to how it should be implemented.

The Candidate of Record for the Liberal Party had responded to the invitation but cancelled early that afternoon for a personal matter.

After the presentation the floor was opened to all attendees to share their ideas and express their views on what they value in an electoral system. I also offered written submission cards for anyone who did not feel comfortable standing to speak.

Some attendees opposed changing Canada's electoral system entirely. They stated they have received no indication from the people in their communities that the system needs to be changed. As one individual from Stratford simply put it "I don't believe Canadians want it". Another man stated that "all systems are imperfect but First Past the Post is the least imperfect".

Many attendees agreed politicians need to work together more. However, they also stated they do not think changing the electoral system is the answer to poor cooperation amongst politicians in Ottawa.

Some constituents spoke about the issue of low voter turnout and political disengagement. However, few believed changing the electoral system would address this problem.

Some attendees expressed the desire to see some form of proportional representation or mixed member proportional representation implemented. They expressed the view that the current First Past the Post system advantages the larger parties and can result in legislative bodies which do not adequately represent the views of the people. However no specific ideas as how to implement Proportional Representation or Mixed Member Proportional were offered.

In contrast, other attendees worried that implementing Proportional Representation would result in the loss of a direct representative. Many consider it important to have an individual they recognize. They believe a local representative is a more effective advocate and allows them to have a direct point of contact to express their opinions. Some attendees expressed scepticism regarding list candidates. They want to ensure they have a local representative they chose rather than someone chosen by a political party. One woman from St. Pauls said: "I don't want a party to pick my representative, I want to pick my representative".

Many attendees from the rural parts of Perth—Wellington shared the view that rural voters are overpowered by their urban and suburban counterparts. They insisted that any changes to Canada's electoral system must not further disenfranchise rural Canadians.

Highly unpopular was the option of ranked ballots such as a Single Transferable Ballot or an Alternative Ballot. This was shared by almost all attendees despite their wide ranging views on other issues. A local NDP organizer claimed that it was potentially even more undemocratic than First Past the Post and could lead to “even greater false majorities”. A local Conservative Party organizer stated he believed the Liberal Government favoured this option as a way to game the system in their favour. Non-affiliated attendees stated they did not want to see their votes reallocated to a 2nd or 3rd choice. One woman stated it was pretty clear “nobody wants ranked ballots”.

Many attendees shared their dislike for strategic voting expressing the view that the current electoral system encourages it. As one individual put it “we have to play the system and vote for parties we don’t want”. They also claimed it gave too much power to so called swing ridings. One young voter from Listowel shared that when she conducted her research in deciding how to vote in the last federal election she found videos on YouTube explaining how to vote strategically.

Many attendees agreed the final decision must be given to Canadians in a national referendum. Of the sixty-one people who attended the event thirty-one expressed the view that a referendum should be held either by stating so publicly, writing so on a submission card, or contacting my office shortly after the event. An experienced municipal councillor from North Perth stated “whatever the government brings down, we need to have a referendum”. A constituent from Stratford stated “all electoral systems have their pros and cons but one thing is certain, we need to have a referendum.” He further stated, “I fear if the government makes changes on its own voters will feel cheated next election, there will be a loss of legitimacy to our elections”.

One attendee who had previously been a member of the Ontario Citizens Assembly of 2006-2007 for the electoral reform referendum stressed the need for education during a referendum. She stated her belief that the 2007 referendum failed because former Premier Dalton McGuinty claimed he would inform voters and failed to do so.

Other ideas expressed included: implementing mandatory voting, ending taxpayer subsidies for political parties, increasing knowledge about voting and Parliamentary Democracy in the education system, implementing a system to recall representatives that inadequately represent their constituents, and encouraging more women to run for office.

Newsletter Response Cards

In my Autumn Newsletter, sent out to every home in Perth—Wellington, I included a page dedicated to Electoral Reform. In it I explained the work of the Committee and included a response card for my constituents to answer questions and share their views. It included three questions, an opportunity for respondents to indicate what they value in an electoral system and a comments section. I received responses from 244 constituents. Not every respondent answered every question.

The first question was: Do you support Mandatory Voting? The responses were:

Yes: 82 (36.74%)

No: 129 (52.87%)

Unsure: 33 (13.52%)

The comments varied from highly supportive to absolute disagreement. Some constituents wrote it would result in non-engaged citizens marking a random name on a list which could skew result. Others thought forcing Canadians to vote would be an infringement on their freedoms. Some provided the example of Old Order Mennonites who choose not to vote for religious reasons. It is possible forcing them to vote would be a violation of their Charter Rights. One constituent wrote “not voting can be a form of protest, and peaceful protest is a necessary part of democracy”.

One constituent quite eloquently submitted that “mandatory voting contradicts the very essence of democracy. Each generation must work to maintain our political freedom to vote, such as teaching the development of our democratic freedoms in our schools”. Others expressed the view that the choice not to vote is important when they decided none of the local candidates is satisfactory and thus do not deserve their vote.

Some constituents in favour of mandatory voting suggested that fines should be charged to citizens who do not vote, with the proceeds being used for worthy causes such as paying down the national debt. In contrast, another constituent wrote “what happened to freedom of choice? People should be allowed to decide for themselves whether to vote. Forcing them to pay a fee for not voting is wrong”. None indicated that stricter penalties should be imposed for not voting.

The second question was: Do you support online voting? The responses were:

Yes: 83 (34.87%)

No: 80 (33.61%)

Unsure: 9 (3.78%)

Only for Canadians with Mobility Issues: 66 (27.73%)

Many constituents stated they have serious concerns regarding the security of online voting. This applied to both the risk of a major hack and many smaller instances of fraud through the stealing and buying of votes by neighbours, friends or family members. Many liked the safe and secure record of paper ballots arguing that there is no way to confirm the identity of a voter unless they vote in person with appropriate identification. Some wrote that Elections Canada has many other options to allow Canadians with mobility issues to vote making online voting unnecessary.

Of those who supported online voting many expressed the view it should be only one option and that in person voting must be maintained.

Next, I provided my constituents with a list of elements to electoral systems and asked them to rank the elements in order of importance to them. The elements were:

- Having a local representative (MP)
- Results proportional to the popular vote, Produces stable governments
- Following a general election the leader of the party with the most votes becomes Prime Minister
- Election results available on election night
- A space for my constituents to write in another element they valued was also provided

“Having a local representative (MP)” was by far the most important element of an electoral system. It was the first or second ranked value of almost every respondent with a mean ranking of 1.75 and a median ranking of 1. Clearly the people of Perth—Wellington place immense value on having a local representative in Ottawa and do not want any new electoral system to change this. One constituent wrote he would like a separate ballot for a party leader aside from the local representative.

Next highest ranking statement was, “Following a general election, the leader of the party with the most votes becomes Prime Minister” with a mean of 2.85 and a median of 2. “Produces stable governments” had a mean of 2.85 and a median of 3.

In fourth was “Results proportional to the popular vote” with a mean rank of 3.39 and a median of 3. From this, I concluded that although some people in Perth—Wellington do consider proportionality to be important, it is far less important than local representation. There were few comments on this issue. One constituent wrote “fringe parties should only have an MP if they win a riding”. Another made the observation that based on his personal experience, proportional representation resulted in a lot of blame shifting by politicians who, when something went wrong, put the blame on their coalition partners. He claimed “proportional representation does not allow one to hold a party responsible”.

Two constituents wrote they support only complete proportional representation. Others however, stated they were concerned proportional representation would remove the guarantee of rural representation in the House of Commons, something they found completely unacceptable.

In fifth was “Election results available on election night” with a mean rank of 3.80 and a median of 4. Given the quick pace of the modern media and with Canadians accustomed to having their results soon after the polls close, it is notable that this element was far less important than the other options. The people of Perth—Wellington are more concerned with the quality of results rather than the speed of receiving them.

None of the write-in elements was mentioned more than once.

Lastly, I provided a statement on a referendum and asked my constituents if they agreed, disagreed or were unsure. The wording was: Canada's electoral system should be changed only if approved by the majority of Canadians in a referendum. The results were:

Yes: 194 (80.17%)

No: 24 (9.92%)

Unsure: 24 (9.92%)

Many constituents expressed the view that the electoral system belongs to all Canadians and so they should decide if it is changed. In the minority view, one constituent expressed worry that a referendum would result in misinformation. Two of the people opposed to a referendum indicated one could be held after an election or two under a new system so voters could assess which system they preferred.

Thirteen of the responses I received included comments indicating my constituents are satisfied with Canada's current electoral system and do not want it changed, especially not without a national referendum.

Many responses included comments not related to electoral reform. This reaffirms my position that most of my constituents care more about the issues currently affecting their daily lives. It also indicated to me that many of the common complaints about Government are not the result of the current system.

Other Communication

Since the election in October 2015 I have received sixty e-mails, one phone call, and one facebook message from constituents on the issue of electoral reform. Some e-mails were signed by more than one constituent.

Of the sixty e-mails, fifty-four were not personally written but were form e-mails sent through an advocacy group such as FairVote, LeadNow, or change.org stating a desire to see Proportional Representation implemented.

Of the personally written e-mails, seven constituents indicated they support maintaining the current First Past the Post system, and two explicitly opposed proportional representation. One favoured Mixed Member Proportional Representation. Ten constituents explicitly stated they wanted a referendum on the issue.

The phone call was from a couple who stated they believe the current electoral system works quite well but if it is to be changed it must do done so by a national referendum.

The facebook message was a request for more information on what the Government is attempting to do but it did not include any views or ideas.

Conclusion

Based on the information received from my constituents, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Democratic Institutions have greatly overstated the public demand for Electoral Reform.

The vast majority, over 80%, of my constituents agree that Canada's electoral system should be changed only if approved by the majority of Canadians in a referendum. As their Member of Parliament, I conclude that any significant changes made to Canada's electoral system without a referendum is entirely unacceptable.

The proposal of a referendum is often criticized by the national media and by members of this committee as justification for not making any change at all. However, many respondents who indicated they did want some form of change on their card also agreed with holding a referendum. One constituent stated that we need to develop a plan that is consistent with "the times we live in". Yet she also indicated a change must be approved by the majority of Canadians in a national referendum. To me this indicates a fatal flaw in the argument, a referendum is not just called on by those who resist change, advocates for change recognize the necessity of every Canadian to have a say as well.

Opinions are mixed regarding both online and mandatory voting. If the committee and the Minister intend to move forward in these areas they should do so with extreme caution regarding security and the protection of rights and freedoms. Making an unwise decision with regards to these issues would seriously damage the legitimacy of future elections.

If a change is made to Canada's electoral system, retaining a local representative elected directly by their constituents is essential to the people of Perth—Wellington. This is particularly important for ensuring the needs of rural areas are represented. There is significant resistance to any changes which further diminish the influence of rural Canada.

There is no clear preferred alternative to First-Past-the-Post. Although many of my constituents do favour the current system, and a minority favours some form of proportional representation, it is difficult for them to determine whether to keep First-Past-the-Post or change to an alternative without knowing what the alternative is.

Of the common complaints my constituents do have about the government and politics in general, there is no consensus these issues are caused by the current electoral system or that they will be solved by changing the electoral system.

Many constituents in Perth—Wellington are concerned about public disengagement regarding politics. However, there is nothing to indicate this is the result of Canada's current electoral system.