

ROBERT OLIPHANT
DON VALLEY WEST



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TOWN HALL REPORT
ON ELECTORAL REFORM
PUBLIC CONSULTATION

RAPPORT SUR LES CONSULTATIONS
PUBLIQUES SUR LA RÉFORME
ÉLECTORALE

HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

CONSULTATIONS			
Date(s) of the Meeting(s)	Time and Length (start time and end time)	Location of Consultation	Total Number of People in Attendance (you may indicate the number of volunteers and employees who assisted with the meeting)
1. September 18	2:00 – 4:00 pm	Temple Emanu-El, 120 Old Colony Road	75 (3 volunteers and 2 staff)
2. October 12	7:30 – 9:30 pm	Lawrence Park Community Church, 2180 Bayview Avenue	90 (2 volunteers and 3 staff)
3. October 13	7:00 – 9:00 pm	Cypriot Community Centre, 6 Thorncliffe Park Drive	40 (2 volunteers and 3 staff)
Form: X Use of the Library of Parliament's visual presentation <input type="checkbox"/> Presentation from the MP's office X Open microphone X Question and answer session X Guest speaker: Mark Holland, MP for the first meeting only <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify):			
SUBJECTS DISCUSSED (summary)			
Voting systems: X	Replacement of the current voting system: X	Voter turnout: X	Accessibility and inclusiveness: X
Mandatory voting: X	Online voting: X	Local representation: X	Other (please specify and describe below): Question of a Referendum, voter turnout, youth engagement, gender balance

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
What did participants say about the current system for electing Members of Parliament (benefits/flaws)? Did participants feel that their votes are fairly translated? (suggested limit: 500 words)
<p>There was no consensus among constituents on this issue. In fact, there was a great variety of opinions, some expressed with great passion. A number of constituents expressed that the current system should not be changed. Some participants are in favour of First Past the Post (FPTP) system, because they believe other systems, such as Proportional Representation (PR), would give</p>

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Special Committee on Electoral Reform (ERRE)
131, rue Queen Street, Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6
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Deadline: Friday, October 14, 2016

too much power to parties rather than the local MP. They stated that a system that would see a party creating lists of candidates to sit in Parliament would take away the power of the voter to elect a local representative. Other participants recognized that many voters do in fact make their decision based on the party leader and the party platform rather than the merits and ideas of a local candidate. Local representation was strongly supported by most constituents.

Participants who support the FPTP system are also sceptical of alternative systems as they feel that other systems may give single issue parties and special interest groups more power, which could threaten national unity and create less social cohesion. There was fear that separatist and/or single issue parties may be given a disproportionate voice in Parliament, which would divide the country. FPTP was said to be a good system to keep the country united.

The FPTP system is also liked as it is simple and familiar to Canadians. Participants stated multiple times that FPTP produces majority governments, which is important in that a majority allows the government to make tough decisions quickly. A minority government was thought to be unstable and too reliant on coalitions.

Some constituents were against changing the current system, because there is no consensus regarding a different system.

Participants who do not like the current system stated that they feel their votes are not fairly translated into seats in the House of Commons. They seemed to be largely supporters of smaller parties. They generally favoured a PR system allowing the House of Commons to directly reflect the popular vote. It was also stated that the current system encourages strategic voting, which means that a voter cannot vote for their first choice. Concern was expressed that voter apathy and disengaged voters resulted from the sense of alienation from the system. No evidence was given, however, to support that conclusion. It seemed that the meetings were not attended by people who do not vote, though they were widely advertised.

Participants also commented on the results of the 2011 election where, even though the Conservative party received a large number of votes in Toronto, there was little representation of the city in the policy making process of the government. Therefore, it was stated that FPTP skews public policy.

Which alternatives to the current system were discussed? Did participants identify specific features that are important to them in an electoral system (for example local representation, proportionality, simplicity, legitimacy etc.)? (suggested limit: 500 words)

All electoral systems (First Past the Post, Alternative Vote, List Proportional, Single Transferable Vote, and Mixed Member Proportional) were discussed at the meetings and in written submissions. However, most comments grouped FPTP and AV systems in one category, while the others were discussed in a PR category.

Some participants favoured the Alternative Vote (AV) system as it seemed to them to be simpler than the other systems – that is if an alternative to FPTP was being considered; both FPTP and AV were said to be easy to understand. The two systems were also considered as representative systems as opposed to PR systems, which some participants believed gave greater power to parties rather than local representatives, which was generally not liked. Participants commented that AV provides voters the flexibility to vote for multiple candidates, especially if they favour more than one party, or if they want to vote with both head and heart. It was also stated that an AV system would reduce strategic voting and could prevent negative campaigning as all candidates would have to fight to be a voter's second choice if not the first.

Criticisms of the AV system included the bias of the system towards a centrist party, which in the case of Canada is the Liberal party. Participants expressed the desire to have a system that is fair and has integrity. Additionally, there was concern that this system would delay the formation of a new government. The example of Australia was discussed at one meeting, where, during one

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election, the government was not formed for many days. Another critique of the system highlighted the lack of representation of small parties in the House of Commons.

Despite acknowledging its complexity, many participants supported some form of a PR system. They would like to ensure that the number of seats in Parliament more closely reflects the popular vote so that all votes could be “of equal value.” There was concern that with FPTP many candidates get elected without the support of the majority. Also, PR was thought to foster more cooperation in Parliament, although this was not substantiated.

There was some support for the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system. Participants liked that every vote counts with this system and that a vote can be cast for both, a local representative and a party. The MMP system is very appealing to people who are loyal to a particular party but like a local candidate representing a different party. However, there was also opposition to this system. There were many comments about the party lists that would need to be created for MMP. There was concern about the criteria that parties would use to select candidates and concern about the difficulty with voting a candidate out of office.

In terms of the List Proportional system, most participants favoured an open list so that they could select representatives rather than allow a party to appoint representatives. Open list was also seen as superior to closed lists, because candidates on a closed list were thought to be hyper partisan with few independent opinions.

The Single Transferable Vote system was viewed as an alternative to FPTP as it provides local representation while also giving more power to smaller parties and independent candidates. Other participants liked the idea of having multiple representatives as they believe it is difficult for one MP to adequately represent a diverse riding, though this was not widely held.

Another system that was discussed was the “Fast PR” system in which the seats allocated in Parliament would be the same as under the FPTP system, but votes would be weighted taking into consideration the popular vote. This idea did not have much support in the meetings and was not part of the formal presentation.

Many participants were also opposed to the various PR systems. They believed that having a PR system would mean that votes would be cast for parties rather than local candidates, which is an important consideration for some voters. Additionally, there was concern that a PR system would produce many single issue parties that may create divisions in the country. The PR system was also said to produce unstable governments. Other participants feared the creation of coalition governments. Also, it was stated that it is better to have one representative rather than multiple representatives in a district.

Did participants discuss why they feel many Canadians choose not to engage in the democratic process? Did they suggest ways to encourage participation? (suggested limit: 500 words)

There was little discussion about solutions to lack of engagement. However, some participants believed that few Canadians choose to engage in the democratic system, because they do not have the assurance that their votes will count and that their voice will be heard. Other participants did not believe that the problem had been clearly defined, which is why it is wrong to assume that a different electoral system will result in greater engagement. There was concern expressed that we may be jumping to solutions before thoroughly analyzing why we have certain problems. It was suggested that voter apathy may be a result of the behavior of elected politicians, the effect of party discipline, or the nature of cabinet government as much as or even more than as a result of the voting system. It was suggested that we should thoroughly research the problem before coming up with a solution which may or may not address the root problems.

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Did participants feel that it should be mandatory to cast a ballot? (Can include spoiling a ballot.) (suggested limit: 500 words)

A majority of participants disagreed with the idea of mandatory voting. It was stated that mandatory voting would produce unpredictable results as many uninformed and disgruntled voters may make the wrong choice. Also, it was believed that there would be many spoiled ballots as a result of mandatory voting.

There was a discussion about getting greater input from young people, and some participants felt that mandatory voting would ensure that youth are adequately represented in the democratic process. There was also a suggestion about making voting mandatory like paying taxes.

Some participants agree with mandatory voting, but believe that it should only be introduced once a better electoral system is in place.

Did participants discuss online voting? Did they express a desire to maintain current voting practices? (i.e. presenting themselves at a polling station, vote secrecy etc.) (suggested limit: 500 words)

Online voting was viewed by some as a good option to engage young people in the democratic system. It was also seen as a way to modernize the current voting practices.

However, there were as many participants who were uncomfortable with the idea of introducing this method of voting. They expressed concerns about privacy and the possibility of hacking, which would compromise the integrity of the system. They would be in favour of online voting if the system is secure. Other participants were worried that it might be difficult to ensure that the right person votes if the identification system is not comprehensive. Other options such as Sunday voting, more advance polls and making voting more accessible to people with disabilities could make online voting less attractive as an option.

Were any other major topics raised by the participants? (i.e. referendum, women/minority representation, accessibility, voter turnout etc.) (suggested limit: 500 words)

As indicated above, many participants felt that the problem(s) with the current electoral system had not been clearly defined. There was a desire to have more information about existing issues, so that the public can provide ideas and solutions that would directly address the problems. Furthermore, some participants stated that the electoral reform process should not be rushed, and that the government should consider taking longer to examine the various possibilities.

The option of a referendum was heavily discussed at the meetings and was a part of most of the written submissions. A small number of participants stated that they would like a referendum on electoral reform as they believed that such a huge change to the democratic system demanded that the majority of Canadians agree on the change. They also believed that consultation sessions will only capture the views of a small part of the population. Additionally, there was a participant who stated that if a government introduces a new system, the next government may reverse the changes. However, if there is a referendum, the next government may be reluctant to make changes. Therefore, a referendum was seen as a way to bring some stability and permanence to the electoral reform process. There were also a few comments that addressed concerns about having participants of the democratic system set the rules for participation. Constituents were concerned that politicians and particular parties would unfairly benefit from this exercise.

The majority of the participants, however, believed that a referendum was neither necessary nor helpful. They stated that a local representative is elected to make decisions on behalf of the constituency, which should be done in this case as well. Others stated that since the Special Committee has spent months understanding the various electoral systems and has been consulting with experts, they are in a better position to make the decision. Canadians may not be well

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informed to vote in a referendum. Other participants were against the referendum as they examined the results and the experience of the Brexit vote and other referendums in Canadian provinces in the past, which they believe did not produce results that benefitted the country. Some participants also stated that a referendum was simply an opportunity to express opposition to the current government's agenda, which would detract from the main issue being discussed. There were also concerns that the voice of the minorities will not be heard in a referendum. Other participants were worried about the cost of the referendum and believed that the wording of the question might not be good enough to produce adequate results. Furthermore, it was believed that a referendum would create a hyper partisan environment and would divide the country.

In addition to the referendum, participants discussed engagement of young people, women, indigenous people, and minorities in politics. There was also a desire expressed for more awareness and education about the democratic process. Some participants suggested that Elections Canada should play a greater role in promoting accessibility, voting times, and election dates and also training men, women, and indigenous people on how to run in an election in order to get a diverse set of candidates. It was also stated that newcomers, who come from countries with different electoral systems, need to be educated on the Canadian system to increase voter engagement and turnout. There was a comment about finding a way to engage expatriates in elections.

Participants also mentioned the need to examine other aspects of the electoral system, such as the work of Elections Canada, electoral fraud, the nomination process, fixed election dates, voter ID requirements, polling results in the media, coverage of party platforms in the media, voting age reform, vote for non-citizens, voting on Sundays, and reform of the Fair Elections Act.

SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND COMMENTS FROM PARTICIPANTS (suggested limit: 1000 words)

While our meetings attracted some voters with strongly held opinions regarding the need to make changes to our electoral system (and many were members of groups advocating very specific electoral systems), in general, most participants not aligned with advocacy groups wanted more information about the underlying problems that a change in the voting system would be attempting to address. Without a thorough understanding of the problem, there is a fear that the voting system may be changed needlessly, or worse, to a system that would be even more problematic.

There was no consensus on the type of electoral system that Canada should adopt. However, preferences for a particular system seemed to be based on the following features: having a local representative, fairer translation of votes into representation in the House of Commons, simplicity of the system, stable government, national unity, and diversity in Parliament.

Additionally, there was little support for a referendum to pick an electoral system, as participants believed that Members of Parliament should make the decision in a representative system. Also, many participants felt that Canadians may not be prepared to vote in a referendum, which is why the Special Committee, which has studied the topic for months, is in a better position to make recommendations regarding changes to the way we elect Members of Parliament.

Report submitted to Special Committee on Electoral Reform (ERRE)

Date: October 14, 2016

MP's signature: 

Robert Oliphant

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