



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

**2016 Public Consultation on Electoral Reform
Summary Report from Town Hall Meeting, July 28th 2016**

**Office of the Member of Parliament
The Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor, P.C., M.P.
Moncton-Riverview-Dieppe**

August 8, 2016

INTRODUCTION

As part of the Electoral Reform Committee's nationwide public consultation with Canadians on this issue, on July 28th, 2016 we invited stakeholders and constituents from across the riding to share with the Member their point of view and their priorities, as well as generate ideas and suggestions on how to address the question of electoral reform in 2016.

To help generate a discussion around these issues, each participant was provided with the following 4 questions:

1. *What do you think about the current system for electing Members of Parliament (benefits/flaws)? Do you feel that votes are fairly translated?*
2. *Do you have a preferred alternative to the current system? What specific features are important to you in an electoral system (for example local representation, proportionality, simplicity, legitimacy etc.)?*
3. *Why do you think many Canadians choose not to engage in the democratic process? How would you encourage participation?*
4. *Do you feel that it should be mandatory to cast a ballot? (This can also include spoiling a ballot.)*

Each participant was then invited to share their thoughts and experiences in relation to each of these questions. Once the discussion took place, a representative from each group was invited to share a summary of their discussion with the rest of the group in a plenary session. This was done so that everyone assembled could draw a more comprehensive picture of all the issues discussed during the session.

Our hope in organizing such an exercise would be that our constituents could help us to better understand Moncton-Riverview-Dieppe's understanding of the issue of electoral reform in Canada, the most important challenges going forward in regards to this issue as well as some of the alternatives that are being proposed and are currently being studied by the committee.

Since there were four discussion questions, a decision was made to group Questions 1 & 2 together into one group category and to do the same with Questions 3 & 4.

The following document represents a brief synopsis of some of these discussions, some key highlights which seem to translate the consensus of the group around electoral reform. For the purposes of the exercise this report will be broken down into the following two key categories:

1. The pros and cons of maintaining the status quo regarding our current electoral system (FPTP).
2. Strategies that can be and should be implemented to help engage Canadians more in our democratic process.

Pros and Cons of Maintaining the Status Quo

While the mandate of the ERRE Committee is in itself crystal clear, it does bear reminding that the issue of replacing first-past-the-post as our electoral system is not one that brings about an immediate consensus among all Canadians. Of course, participants certainly tried their best to be objective in their analysis of FPTP and while most of them reached a consensus that it would in fact be best to move forward with a different type of system-and we'll be discussing some of the reasons why a bit later-several participants certainly did underline the important challenges that lie in discarding a system that, for better or worse, has defined our political system for over a century.

Here are just some of the pros of FPTP that were mentioned as well as a brief explanation of this balloting system's relatively positive impact on our governance and our democracy:

- The first advantage that was highlighted is its simplicity; people understand the current system because at its core it's a very simple system-there are a given number of candidates on a ballot and the candidate with the most ballots cast in their favour wins the seat. All Canadian voters generally understand this system.
- It's also a system that by design-because it usually leads to a two-party system-favours strong majority governments and Canadians tend to see this in a positive light; the feeling that clear social action on any given issue as well as better governance in general usually emanate from strong majorities in Parliament.
- Again because it generally tends to favour two-party systems, FPTP also makes things relatively easier from a voter perspective because one of the chief complaints that is expressed by critics of our political system and those who do not feel engaged by it is that politics (and our system of governance in general) is often confusing and people can't really get a good grasp of the issues and the platforms put forward by the parties; adding more parties to the mix would only add to that confusion.

However, as evidenced by the amount of time that was spent discussing this viewpoint, by and large, most of the participants felt that the drawbacks to our current political system largely outweighed these perceived benefits.

Several participants even found direct counter arguments for most of the expressed benefits of FPTP starting with:

- The flawed perception regarding strong majority governments: people seem to think that the only governments that enact positive change are those with strong majorities but history actually tends to disagree with that notion, for instance, many of Canada's most progressive social programs (Medicare, the Canada Pension Plan, child benefits) were created as a result of the action of minority governments.

In addition, the overwhelming consensus of the group was that FPTP has many inherent flaws, including some that are fairly obvious such as:

- FPTP does not accurately reflect how Canadians feel about a given party: the reason being that the percentage of vote obtained by a party in an election does not effectively translate to its seat count and in many cases, especially in recent history, governing parties come to power without a clear majority of voters, and therefore without a clear mandate from the electorate;
- FPTP limits Canadians' choices at the ballot box and favours parties with centrist attitudes: because it's very difficult to find a consensus on many important social issues, parties often steer clear of making those tough choices for fear that they will alienate their voter base. This leads to slow progress on issues like minority rights, moral and ethical issues, etc;
- FPTP promotes strategic and block voting which in itself tends to favour parties that want to hold onto to the status quo, again effectively blocking real social and political change in Canada.
 - There was also an interesting consensus around the issue of submitting the idea of our electoral reform to a referendum and which, as per the point of view of our participants, is also largely tied to

this idea of maintaining the status quo. To this end, many of the participants noted that the surest way to ensure that a new idea does not gain traction among the electorate or be implemented by it is to submit it to a referendum. Simply put, it's become too easy to campaign against something new and different and also to campaign in favour of the status quo because generally speaking people are not comfortable with too much change in their lives.

- Finally the last argument against FPTP and one which seemed to monopolize the discussion to some extent is the notion that our current electoral system, in spite of its perceived stability and simplicity, is in many ways responsible for much of the apathy that Canadians feel about politics. Canadians feel that their political system effectively limits their choices at the ballot box, that it does not reflect their views nor does it translate to the representation that they would like to see in Parliament, and in turn to discussion on the kind of issues that they truly value. In other words, many of our citizens feel that their vote simply does not matter.

This now leads us to the second part of this report where we will summarize the many strategies that were brought forth by our participants in order to engage Canadians more and to make them feel more involved and better represented within our political system.

Strategies for Engaging Canadians in Our Democratic Process

While the participants in our discussion were not necessarily able to build a strong consensus on exactly which electoral system should replace FPTP, for instance some felt that a more pure version of proportional representation was the way forward and others still felt that a more moderate middle ground between FPTP and PR such as P3 (Proportional, Preferential, Personalized) or Mixed Member Proportional (MMPR) were the most viable options, most of them did raise many interesting points on how Canadians have become completely disaffected by our democratic process and how we could work to remedy this.

This is an issue of course which goes beyond the type of balloting system that we adopt as a country going forward and transcends most of the electoral systems that are currently being proposed and so it certainly warrants a greater focus. Therefore for the purposes of this exercise, we've chosen to focus on this particular aspect of electoral reform and highlight some of the strategies that were suggested to help Canadians get more involved and also feel more involved in our democratic process.

First, several strategies were put forward as ideas that would help engage Canadians in the democratic process, such as lowering the voting age to 16, making voting mandatory for all Canadians as well as the adoption of online voting practices. All of these concepts were met with some favour in keeping with our constituents' consensus that much more could and should be done to ensure that voting be made more accessible.

However, most of the strategies that were enumerated by the participants in the group revolve around the same theme: education. There are simply too many Canadians, it was noted, that do not thoroughly understand how our political system functions, to the point where they feel completely alienated in participating in the process. More to the point, they feel that their participation is usually futile because the system is the way it is and history will continue to repeat itself. To this end, a more significant effort needs to be put forth by our federal government, in partnership with the provinces and territories, towards educating the public about the finer points of our political system. Ideally, this process starts in school because if we can ingrain in our children while they're still young and absorbing ideas that will shape their viewpoint later about the importance of the values of civics and democracy and everyone's important role in taking part in this process, while simultaneously giving them the knowledge that they need to really understand such a process, then we are forever equipping the next generation with the tools they will require to face the tough issues and also

harnessing their power as citizens in an effective democracy.

One suggestion that was also noted was the institution of mock elections in schools across the country to encourage participatory voting. It was even suggested that those elected in these mock elections could then be sent as local representatives to a national youth organization that could serve as a type of youth-Parliament, effectively translating their point of view to the elected representatives in Ottawa and also ensuring that their voices are heard across the country.

Of course, while governments have a clear and crucial role in shaping this kind of thoughtful action, many of our participants also felt that an independent, non-partisan vehicle should also help drive this kind of change. To that end, it was suggested that Elections Canada could and should play a much greater role in educating the public and effectively recruiting our next generation of democrats, but in order for them to do so, they would need to have much greater resources at their disposal so as to fully harness their potential.

CONCLUSION

In closing, the citizens of Moncton-Riverview-Dieppe, just like most Canadians, recognize that this is watershed moment in our history and that we have a real opportunity to effect real change across our country-the kind of change that will leave a lasting impression on the lives of our children and grandchildren. We can change our democracy so that no one gets left behind and that everyone feels that their voice can be heard.

They are also eager to lend their voices in helping to shape this change. Everyone who participated in our discussion had a long-term view of Canada and we feel that it is this kind of legacy-thinking that will help set us on a path towards a fairer, more transparent political system and that will lead to the type of change we need in our society