

HON. JANE PHILPOTT
MARKHAM—STOUFFVILLE
&
HON. JOHN MCCALLUM
MARKHAM—THORNHILL



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

L'HON. JANE PHILPOTT
MARKHAM—STOUFFVILLE
&
L'HON. JOHN MCCALLUM
MARKHAM—THORNHILL

TOWN HALL REPORT ON ELECTORAL REFORM
PUBLIC CONSULTATION

RAPPORT SUR LES CONSULTATIONS
PUBLIQUES SUR LA RÉFORME ÉLECTORALE

CONSULTATION			
Date of the Meeting	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)
09/14/2016	1 hour, 30 min. (7:30pm-9pm)	Markham Public Library	96 participants 10 staff members (approx.)
Form: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Use of the Library of Parliament's visual presentation <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Presentation from the MP's office <input type="checkbox"/> Open microphone <input type="checkbox"/> Question and answer session <input type="checkbox"/> Guest speaker <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): Our Town Hall meeting was jointly hosted by the Hon. Jane Philpott's office and the Hon. John McCallum's office. Participants at the meeting were divided into groups of approximately 10 people each and were asked to debate the consultation questions after a short presentation by Ms. Philpott and Mr. McCallum. Once the groups had debated the issues, each group selected a representative to share a summary of their discussion with the entire audience. Following the discussions, groups were asked to submit their notes, which were later used to inform this report. 			
SUBJECTS DISCUSSED (summary)			
Voting systems: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Replacement of the current voting system: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Voter turnout: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Accessibility and inclusiveness: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Mandatory voting: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Online voting: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Local representation: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Other (please specify and describe below) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age of Eligibility for Voters (16 vs. 18)

Please return to:

Special Committee on Electoral Reform (ERRE)
131, rue Queen Street, Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6
Tel./tél.: 613-992-3150 Fax/télécopieur: 613-947-3089 ERRE@parl.gc.ca

Deadline: Friday, October 14, 2016

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)

Many participant groups at the Town Hall meeting voiced concerns that our current electoral system leaves voters feeling ignored. While a wide majority agreed that changes to our system are needed, some among them felt that the current system was still worth retaining as long as ways could be found to improve how the system works.

Some participants in support of the current First Past the Post (FPTP) approach pointed to the system's simplicity as their reason for preferring it, while others suggested that voters were already familiar with the workings of FPTP and so any new system would just confuse the electorate. There were, however, no entire groups that came out unanimously in favour of keeping the current system, and of those who polled their participants on the matter, no more than 30% support for maintaining the status quo was reported within any one group.

Attendees expressed the belief that the current system poorly reflects the will of the majority, as the parties that form government typically capture fewer than 50% of the popular vote. Some participants who supported change did share their concerns that the proposed alternate systems may be too confusing for people to understand, which may prevent some people from advocating for change. The complexity of the alternatives to FPTP may explain why no one system emerged as the overwhelming favourite among participants.

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)

During the consideration of alternate voting systems, participants were unable to agree on which one system was the best replacement for the current FPTP; however, several systems did emerge as promising options. Many of the groups engaged in a discussion around a Proportional Representation (PR) system, with the Single Transferrable Vote style being preferred by a number of them. We also heard support for an Alternate Vote (Preferential Voting) system, as well as minor support for a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system.

Some participants felt strongly that PR was the best choice, though no clear consensus emerged among participant groups on that issue. Some resistance to PR was also encountered, with concerns brought up that a PR approach would not lead to stable governments. Generally, those who supported PR, as well as those who opposed the idea, were in agreement that a Closed Party List component was definitely not the direction to go when trying to ensure a transparent democratic system.

Supporters of the Single Transferrable Vote method of PR believed this system to be more inclusive and equal than the alternatives. It was thought that this system offered voters the most choice and the most accountability. We also heard a small amount of opposition expressed towards one common component of this system: the idea of multiple MPs serving a single constituency. At least two of the groups told us that a single MP per constituency was important to retain for clarity, and it prevented MPs from outside urban centres from having to represent gigantic geographic areas that would be difficult to manage.

Several groups mentioned the Alternative Vote option as a preference as well. These groups said that this system was their preferred option because it would eliminate strategic voting and ensure that the winning candidate had broad support. There was also mention that this option would be beneficial, except for voters who were strongly partisan in nature. Critics of this approach pointed

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out that this system tends to favour centrist parties and does not typically yield proportional results.

One of the overarching themes that emerged from the group discussions was simplicity. Participants expressed a desire to have an electoral system that was simple and approachable so that as many voters as possible could understand and engage in the process in a meaningful way.

Another theme was the concept of collaboration. Some participants preferred having a system that allows politicians to be less partisan and adversarial so that they can work together in a productive fashion.

Finally, the idea of fairness was a feature that continued to appear throughout the Town Hall discussions. Some felt that Canada needed a system that better translated individual votes into election results.

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)

Participants felt very strongly about the importance of increasing voter engagement, and shared their thoughts about why some Canadians avoid engaging in the democratic process.

The decorum in the House of Commons was identified as a major source of alienation for voters, and the idea that Question Period was no more than a competition for a 30 second sound bite which wastes time and accomplishes very little. Others identified negative campaign advertising as a barrier to voter engagement, as well as the idea that money creates an unfair advantage for certain parties during elections. No matter what the cause, it was quite apparent that increasing voter engagement was a high priority for participants, and an essential part of boosting participation that would lead to a stronger democracy for our country.

The need for an expansion of civics education was seen as necessary to increasing voter participation, and many felt that this would help young Canadians develop into informed voters. Holding mock elections in schools, having a non-voting parliamentarian sit in the House of Commons to represent youth, and allowing students to do their community hours by helping out with electoral work during an election period were among some of the most-suggested options put forth by participants. Given the complex nature of any potential changes to our electoral system, it was deemed to be important that Elections Canada play a strong role in public education to ensure that the electorate is well versed in how any new system functions.

We also heard the desire for increased multilingual voter outreach in order to engage communities where English and French are not the primary languages spoken. The idea of multilingual ballots received strong support, as these may assist with providing clarity and encourage participation within communities who may currently shy away from voting due to language barriers.

Many groups also recommended that polling stations be kept open for longer periods of time during elections to facilitate participation. Some participants even suggested that Election Day be made into a national holiday to increase the likelihood that voters were available to vote. Others recommended more consultations by the government to engage the public in the governing process.

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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)

We heard relatively little support for adopting a mandatory voting approach in Canada. Many groups indicated having only a small number of members who believed mandatory voting to be a viable option, and only two full groups out of the twelve said that mandatory voting was an idea worth investigating further. Though we heard that new ways needed to be found to raise voter participation, many felt that a mandatory voting approach was simply going too far.

With that said, even among those who expressed support for mandatory voting, there was very little enthusiasm for any form of penalty being forced upon those who chose to abstain from voting. There was concern that the application of any penalty-based mandatory voting system could be costly to taxpayers and difficult to enforce. Instead, multiple participant groups expressed a desire for an incentivized approach to voting such as through the introduction of a voter tax credit, which became a popular idea among some groups after it was suggested.

It was generally agreed that a mandatory voting approach would, by design, increase voter turnout, but there were still lingering concerns that this would be the wrong approach to take if our goal as Canadians was also to encourage engagement. Forcing Canadians to participate in voting would not necessarily lead to a more-informed electorate. It would not inspire voters to learn more about the issues and the candidates, nor would it promote active participation in conversations with other voters about the important issues facing the nation. A tax credit was seen by participants as a far better way to encourage voter engagement.

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)

Strong support was heard from the majority of Town Hall groups for the introduction of some form of online voting option. Only one group indicated unanimous opposition to online voting, while some other groups reported hearing mixed support from their members.

Both those who supported the idea, as well as those who opposed it, expressed serious concerns over vote security. Some pointed to recent news stories about public email hacking and cyber attacks by foreign governments, prompting concerns over whether any online voting system could ever be entirely secure. The general feeling was that the government had not yet demonstrated an ability to secure its networks from foreign hackers, and so there were doubts that any online voting system could be 100% secure. An online voting method that was not absolutely secure would throw into question any unexpected outcomes and could cost the public's confidence in the results of a general election.

Ensuring public confidence in an online voting system would be a big hurdle to overcome, but if it could be done right, groups generally indicated that they supported an online option. Many felt that an online option would help to facilitate voting for those who have accessibility issues, but also make it easier for those who have problems with transit, those who have children, or the many young Canadians who would vote if they had a more-convenient option available to them.

The suggestion was also made that an incremental approach could be used to build public trust in an online voting system. Such an approach could include electronic voting machines at polling stations to allow people to grow accustomed to an electronic method, and build confidence that the system is secure before progressing to a widespread online voting option.

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

Referendum:

Support for holding a referendum appeared to be low among participant groups. It was pointed out that previous attempts at electoral reform (such as the attempt in Ontario) resulted in no changes, as people generally stick with what they already know. There were clear concerns that the same would happen if a referendum were held on this issue. Further, the recent "Brexit" referendum vote was used to illustrate how referendums may not always yield the best results.

We did hear some minor support for a referendum, and were told that changes to our electoral system needed be brought to the people to vote on because anything less could lead to further disengagement by voters.

Accessibility:

Participant groups provided strong support for increasing accessibility to help more Canadians vote. Suggestions included longer operating hours for polling stations, opening polling stations weeks earlier, making election day a holiday to ensure more voters have time off, and introducing some form of electronic voting option.

Inclusivity:

A number of suggestions were put forth on how to increase inclusivity, including offering multi-language ballots, and bringing back mock voting in schools to engage young Canadians earlier.

Lower Voting Age:

Reducing the voting age to 16 received very little support among participants. Some did feel that young Canadians had more at stake over the long term and should therefore be allowed an opportunity to vote. The majority, however, seemed to share the feeling that the voting age should remain at 18, as young Canadians were believed to be far more mature at age 18 than at 16.

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

It is fair to say that the participants of our Town Hall meeting expressed a sincere desire for change in the way our current electoral system functions. Many were concerned that our current system does a poor job of representing the majority of voters in Canada, and while some people still preferred to retain our current system, the majority of participants felt that change was far overdue.

Several alternate electoral system options were debated as replacements to our current system. Proportional Representation, particularly the Single Transferrable Vote option, seemed to be a popular choice for further analysis. However, nearly everyone who spoke with us on the issue seemed to agree that a Closed Party List component was not a desirable element of PR worth including as a part of any new system. The Alternate Vote system was also selected as an option worth investigating, though some did worry that this system tends to highly favour centrist parties, such as the current government.

We did hear some support for considering Mixed Member Proportional, as well as for retaining the current system; however, it seemed clear that whichever system is to be used, it must be as simplistic as possible to ensure increased voter participation and engagement.

We certainly heard loud and clear that new ways must be found to encourage Canadians to vote

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and to encourage engagement in the voting process. Some certainly felt that a brand new system would reinvigorate people's interest, while others felt that it was vital to come up with new strategies to reach out to voters and bring them into the process. There were also those who felt that a combination of a new system along with new voter outreach methods was the best route forward.



We heard the need for expanded civics education in our schools that would encourage young voters to become more engaged. We also heard a number of suggestions to promote youth engagement outside the classroom, including symbolic youth parliamentarians and expanding student community involvement hours to allow elections-related volunteer work.

Our Town Hall participants shared their thoughts about the need for expanded voter outreach. For communities where English or French are not the primary languages spoken, multi-language ballots were suggested as one possible measure. Online voting was also an option debated, with most participants indicating their support for some form of online option being included in the future. There were, however, strong concerns about the security of online voting, and it is clear that any online option must be proven to be secure before the public will fully endorse this idea. The stakes in an election are too high for any uncertainty to exist, and so if an online voting system is not reliably secure, elections results may be called into question.

The concept of mandatory voting was debated and ultimately determined to be an unappealing option. Some felt that a penalty for not voting was far too harsh, while others felt that an incentivized approach like a voter tax credit would help to encourage voters to participate without the need for a mandatory system.

Finally, when it came to the question of a referendum, we heard relatively little support for the idea. There were certainly a number of participants who felt that this was essential, but a majority of those who spoke to the issue believed that referendums were messy and favoured the status quo.

In the end, it was clear that voters are asking for change. They want a system that appeals to marginalized voters, and one that helps all Canadians feel like their vote truly counts.

Report submitted to Special Committee on Electoral Reform (ERRE)		Date: October 14, 2016
MPs' signatures:		
		Hon. John McCallum
		Hon. Jane Philpott

Reports must be submitted to the Clerks of the Committee no later than Friday, October 14, 2016 in both official languages.

Please note that this document is for illustrative purposes only and can be modified or adapted to your needs. The report will be published on the Committee's web site.

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