

Submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

From: Rachael Harder, the Member of Parliament for Lethbridge

October 14, 2016

Introduction.

In June 2016, the House of Commons adopted a motion establishing a special committee on Electoral Reform (hereafter ERRE). The terms of reference of ERRE include two instructions which are of key importance:

1. [T]hat the Committee be directed to study and advise on additional methods for obtaining the views of Canadians;

And

2. [T]hat the Committee be directed to issue an invitation to each Member of Parliament to conduct a town hall in their respective constituencies and provide the Committee with a written report of the input from their constituents to be filed with the Clerk of the Committee no later than October 14, 2016.

The invitation to study and advise on “additional methods for obtaining the views of Canadians” means that it is entirely within ERRE’s mandate to recommend that Canadian voters be consulted, by means of a referendum, to determine in advance whether they endorse any specific proposal for a new voting system.

Since the requirement for such a referendum has been a part of Conservative Party policy for over a decade, Conservative MPs concluded it would be reasonable to consult with their constituents to determine whether this cross-section of Canadians feels that a referendum is necessary or desirable.

Mail-Back Consultation: A More Inclusive Methodology.

Over the early autumn, I undertook consultations with my constituents by means of a mail-out questionnaire that was substantially similar in both form and content to one many of my colleagues used. It was anticipated that this would produce a higher number of participants than town hall meetings, and that the self-selection problem inherent to town hall meetings would be significantly reduced by the use of a mail-out instrument.

The mail-out instrument that I used was designed to be impartial, and contained the following features:

- An introductory letter from the MP for the riding, outlining the ERRE committee process and explaining how the feedback mechanism works;
- A series of quotations, taken from public statements made by advocates both for and against holding a referendum. The goal was to select the most convincing arguments both for and against referendum. Thus, for example, the longest quotation against referendum is excerpted from Minister Monsef’s July 6th testimony at ERRE.

- A review of the ERRE timeline.
- Polling data from two recent polls by different organizations, as to the merits of holding a referendum.
- Instructions on how to fill out the ballot (particularly if more than one voter resides at that address). It was clearly indicated that respondents could return their surveys and comments to their MP, postage free.
- The ballot itself. The question varied somewhat in some of the instruments sent out by some MPs, but the majority asked the following question: *“Before changing how we elect our MPs, should the government hold a referendum to get the approval of Canadians?”*

Results.

For the riding of Lethbridge 592 ballots were received, of which 555 stated they wanted a referendum, while 37 told me they did not support a referendum. **As of Friday, October 14th at 3pm, 93.3% of respondents in my riding told me they want a referendum before any change to how we elect Members of Parliament.**

This is in line with the 81,389 responses to a similar mail-out used by my colleagues, of which 90% (72,740) supported a referendum.

The response rate to this mail-out instrument was four to five times higher than what we would expect to see from a typical “householder”---that is, a specific form of House of Commons’ sanctioned mail-out designed to be sent to each household in an MP’s electoral district.

Conclusion.

The results of this consultation speak for themselves. Respondents to my survey voted overwhelmingly in favour of a referendum.

Support for a referendum across Canada has been shown to be both broad and persistent. The response to our surveys simply follows what we’ve come to expect from the multiple public opinion polls showing Canadians want the final decision on any new voting system. Between February 9, 2016 and September 28, 2016, public opinion polling firms Ipsos, Insights West, Forum Research, and EKOS Research all released polls showing that consistent majorities of Canadians, ranging as high as 73%, think that a national referendum is necessary before changing how Canadians elect their MPs.

Six of eight such polls show that a majority of Canadians in every province think that any change to how MPs are elected should be put to a referendum. Five of eight show that between 65% and 73% of Canadians support a referendum at the national level. Support for a referendum is consistent across genders and age groups, and while it is true that support for a referendum is higher among Conservative supporters than among supporters of the NDP and Liberals, a clear majority of supporters of both parties also support referendum.

Polling also shows that no more than 8% of Canadians are strongly opposed to holding a referendum.

Based on these highly credible demonstrations of consistent widespread support for referendum, I would strongly recommend that the Special Committee include a recommendation to put any proposal to change how MPs are elected to Canadians in a national referendum prior to its implementation, and encourage the government to do likewise to give Canadians the final decision.

Respectfully submitted

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'RH' followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

Rachael Harder, MP
Lethbridge