

Brief to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

Bernadette Jordan, Member of Parliament for South Shore—St. Margaret's, Nova Scotia
Regarding: feedback from constituents on electoral reform

5 October, 2016

In my capacity as the Member of Parliament for South Shore—St. Margaret's (SSSM), I hosted a town hall on electoral reform on August 3, 2016 in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, to which approximately 40 people attended. This brief to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform (ERRE) summarizes the feedback received, both from that consultation, as well as from the approximately 120 form and personalized emails received at my office on the topic. Because of duplicates in emails and meeting participation, to my best estimation, this brief reflects the perspectives of approximately 90 constituents in SSSM who took time, energy, and research to share their views. I thank them very much for their thoughtfulness and enthusiasm for this topic and for their input.

The 2-hour meeting's format consisted of a short presentation on the impetus behind the public consultation and a brief background on electoral reform, followed by brief introductions. The consultation part involved three questions, which were first discussed in small groups and then summarized in the larger group, followed by an open discussion with the whole group. The three questions focused on representativeness in the current voting system (and possible solutions to make the system more inclusive), discussing mandatory and electronic voting, and what the relationship between [an] elected Member[s] of Parliament and citizens in their electoral district should look like.

My office's Executive Assistant co-facilitated the meeting, took notes, and helped to compile this report. The brief is organized around the themes of those discussions that are within the committee's mandate to review.

Thank you for considering feedback from residents of South Shore—St. Margaret's as part of the ERRE's deliberations.

Bernadette Jordan, Member of Parliament
South Shore—St. Margaret's

Underrepresented Groups

Most participants at the meeting agreed that specific groups — for example indigenous people, youth, women, lower-income Canadians, people with disabilities, newcomers to Canada, and ethnic minorities — were underrepresented in the electoral process and in elected office. A few disagreed, saying that this was a choice on the part of those individuals, not a systemic exclusion. One person mentioned social policies to address poverty would support higher voter turnout. One person noted — and many agreed — that these are not simple issues and that the barriers (and thus solutions) may be different for different groups. However, generally, some suggested online voting and mandatory voting (discussed in more detail below), as well as Sunday voting, as options to increase voter turnout.

Many participants at the meeting, as well as in emails, remarked that people who voted for a candidate who did not win the seat, or those for whose preferred party did not win a proportional number of seats in the House of Commons, were under-represented. These people generally supported a form of proportional representation. A few other participants countered this idea with the thought that all votes count, it's just that not everyone's preferred candidate or party won.

A few other people suggested electors who aren't in swing ridings and people who have been living outside of Canada for more than five years are underrepresented in Canada's democratic system, though there was minimal discussion on these two items.

Many people suggested lowering the voting age to 16 to encourage more youth to become engaged at a younger age. Many others suggested more civics education for youth, particularly in schools, would result in higher youth vote turnout, though some disagreed that though helpful, education can't be regarded as a "panacea" solution for voter engagement.

There was a long and enthusiastic discussion — which blended into the conversation about the role of an MP as primarily a representative of their party or of their constituents — about people not voting nor engaging with the democratic process because it was suggested they felt like it didn't matter what they did, that politicians were not trustworthy, and their vote or participation wouldn't make a difference.

Members of Parliament as party members and as representatives of their constituencies

Though this question does not specifically focus on electoral systems, the values that were expressed as part of this discussion provide significant context to the question of deciding what electoral system best serves Canadians. The conversation also included many suggestions on ways that MPs can communicate with constituents, and a balance of time between supporting people with individual support versus in a legislative function in the House of Commons.

Most participants at the meeting seemed to agree that there was a significant tension between representing the views of a party and those of constituents. Most who offered feedback on this point wanted to see more free votes in the House of Commons. Acknowledging that a constituency is not a consistent mass of one opinion, some participants wanted an MP to always vote and support with what

the majority of their constituents wanted, whereas others supported the idea of an MP as a trustee who makes decisions based on what they think will reasonably benefit most people in their constituency.

Some people felt that their views were not properly represented currently in Parliament because they supported a non-Liberal candidate in the last election, and suggested if there were multiple MPs for particular areas (under a proportional representation system), their views would be better represented.

Mandatory Voting

Though many believed that mandatory voting would increase the turnout rate, the vast majority of participants did not support mandatory voting on the grounds that it would further disenfranchise some groups, low-income Canadians in particular. Some people suggested using incentives rather than punishment to increase voter turnout, including small gift certificates to local businesses, or a tax credit. Some expressed trepidation with any kind of private business involvement in incentivizing an electoral process. A few participants emphasized that if there was a mandatory voting policy, it would be important to have a “none of the above” option on the ballot.

Online/Electronic Voting

Most participants supported the idea of online or electronic voting as a logical “next step” for Canada, though some expressed some concern with cyber-security and the need for a robust paper trail to make sure it is trustworthy. A few people noted that the introduction of online voting would make voting more convenient and accessible, but may not result in more engagement. A few participants noted that some areas of SSSM do not have [reliable] access to broadband internet, so this conversation is moot for some eligible voters. The idea of telephone voting was also suggested with some support.

Electoral System Reform

The vast majority of people who provided feedback on this topic support some form of electoral system change. A few people noted they were comfortable with waiting for the election past the 2019 for changes, in order for the reforms to be properly communicated with the public.

A few people mentioned they were specifically happy with the current First Past the Post system.

A handful of people supported the idea of a referendum, saying that a majority of Canadians need to support changes before changes could occur, whereas another handful specifically said they would not like to see a referendum on the topic, citing concerns with the high probability of most Canadians being ill-informed or deliberately misinformed of the implications of different voting systems.

Proportional Representation

Most people that provided feedback on electoral reform to me were interested in some form of proportional representation (PR), though most of these people didn't identify a specific system of preference.

Those who supported PR lauded it as a system that would result in more collaboration between members of different political parties, in Canadians feeling like their vote counted and their views are more represented in our government, and elections would produce MPs who are more representative of the Canadians who elected them.

There was no dominant option among those who identified a particular PR system as preferable. These comments varied in both topic and position on the topic, including the complexity of the system for voters to understand, how to make sure that regional issues are still well-represented (which could change if the sizes of electoral districts changed), what should be the role of different MPs in a multi-member system, and how Canadians and candidates would respond to open and closed lists under some PR systems.

Alternate Vote/ Ranked Ballot

A ranked ballot system was not discussed in great detail at the meeting. One person noted it would be more cumbersome to administer. Some people felt it produced similar results to First Past the Post, which would not be satisfactory. Another person noted they preferred a ranked ballot system as it would ensure that Canada's governance would not be unduly compromised by extreme views.