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Your Member of Parliament in Saanich-Gulf Islands

Spring 2016 Newsletter



Introduction

Thanks to everyone who came out – often on cold and rainy nights! – for our first round of 2016 Town Halls, held through January. Altogether, at eight different locations, a total of over 1200 people participated. Saanich-Gulf Islands continues to demonstrate a very significant level of citizen engagement.

Top issues mentioned in the eight Town Halls included the follow up to the Paris Agreement on climate, the proposed LNG plant in Saanich Inlet, the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, the plight of Syrian refugees linked to the war and unrest in the region, Indigenous issues and electoral reform, among dozens of others.

I am dedicating this newsletter to the issue of electoral reform. It is clearly a concern for my constituents. And it is timely. The Government of Canada is about to launch a significant effort aimed at reform. All of us can play a role.

Over the next few weeks we should have more details. It is expected that an all-party special committee of Parliament (yet to be named) will conduct hearings. It is widely anticipated that the hearings will take place across Canada. I also expect there to be efforts to gain the advice of Canadians through email, websites and traditional mailed advice and positions.

Please fill out the survey at the end of this newsletter to assist me in representing your views.

My deepest thanks once again for the honour of serving as your Member of Parliament.

The New Government's Agenda for Reform

The Trudeau administration has announced an ambitious agenda for reform of our democratic institutions – from the Senate, to how we vote, to how we campaign and to tracking government performance.

The mandate letters from the Prime Minister to each of his Cabinet members can be found on the Prime Minister's Office website. That is an unprecedented move and one I applaud whole heartedly. In the past, the Prime Minister sent "letters of mandate" to every minister, but they were never made public. Now every Canadian citizen has access to read the specific priorities and tasks assigned to them as they accept the role of minister. Just go to the Prime Minister's Office website to look up a letter that interests you. (If you do not use computers and want to read a letter of mandate, just contact my office and we'll print it and mail it to you.)

Here is what the new Minister of Democratic Institutions has been mandated to do by the Prime Minister:

- Advise on a new process for non-partisan, merit-based Senate appointments;
- Bring forward a proposal to establish a special parliamentary committee to consult on electoral reform, including preferential ballots, proportional representation, mandatory voting and online voting;
- Repeal any sections of the Elections Act that make it harder for Canadians to vote, while also taking steps to increase the independence of the Commissioner of Canada Elections;
- Bring forward options to create an independent commissioner to organize leaders' debates during elections.

I have condensed some of the above points and there are other areas listed – including more transparency, a review of the Access to Information Act, and working with the President of Treasury Board to develop performance standards for government services, and clear reporting on those standards. Note that the bullet point on the electoral reform mandate is reproduced verbatim.

The new minister, Maryam Monsef, is one of the most interesting choices of the new Prime Minister's Cabinet. She is the youngest. Thirty years old, she came to Canada with her widowed mother and sisters at age eleven. The family were refugees from Afghanistan. She won in the traditionally Conservative riding of Peterborough, Ontario, previously held by Dean Del Mastro.

Now she must set out the course for public engagement and all-party work in Parliament to fulfill a key promise of the Speech from the Throne: the government "will take action to ensure that 2015 will be the last federal election conducted under the first-past-the-post voting system."

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Swearing-in Ceremony, November 17, 2015.

The Senate Mandate

With a current backlog of Senate vacancies, moving the Senate to its full complement of Senators will be done under a new process. Most of the vacancies are in Manitoba, Quebec and Ontario.

Minister Monsef has announced a non-partisan expert board as directed in her letter of mandate. This is from the government press release:

Under the new process, an Independent Advisory Board on Senate Appointments will be established to provide advice to the Prime Minister on candidates for the Senate. The Independent Advisory Board will be guided by public, merit-based criteria, in order to identify Canadians who would make a significant contribution to the work of the Senate. The criteria will help ensure a high standard of integrity, collaboration, and non-partisanship in the Senate.

The board is chaired by a very well respected former senior civil servant, Huguette Labelle. I had the honour of working with her when she was the director of CIDA. Her CV is a mile long, having served as Deputy Minister in many departments. She received the Order of Canada in 1989 and was made a Companion to the Order of Canada in 2001.

I am sure many people will greet any half-measures in Senate reform with skepticism. And it is true that having a non-partisan board make recommendations to the Prime Minister, who will make the appointments through a secret process, is not a radical reform. Nevertheless, I think it will be an improvement. And it has the big advantage of not requiring that we open the Constitution.

To have an elected Senate, or to abolish the Senate, we will need to open up the Constitution and ensure unanimous provincial support. Knowing Huguette Labelle, I am confident that the only people who will make it to a list of recommendations to the Prime Minister will be merit-based and excellent. Still, it is not a legislated change. A future prime minister could go back to stacking the Senate with party hacks and patronage appointments. So, on this reform, we can admit that perhaps half a loaf is better than none.

Electoral Reform

This is the biggest commitment to meaningful reform in the mandate of the Minister of Democratic Institutions. In fact, it may be the most important reform in all the promises found in the Speech from the Throne.

The commitment to ensure that 2015 is the last election held under First Past the Post (FPTP) is bold. The Trudeau administration is also promising to ensure the change is made without holding a referendum.

In the NDP 2015 election platform, a pledge was made to eliminate FPTP and replace it with a specific type of proportional representation (PR), called mixed member proportional (MMP). The NDP also committed to make the change without holding a referendum. The Green Party also pledged to get rid of FPTP and replace it with some form of PR. When all the votes for the three parties opposed to continuing with FPTP voting are considered, 65% of Canadians voted for platforms committed to changing our voting system.

The Conservatives in the Senate have threatened to block legislation getting rid of FPTP unless a referendum is held. Pretty clearly, the unelected Senate does not have the legitimacy to do such a thing, but it does have the power.

The question is how many Canadians want to get rid of the “winner take all” voting process we currently use.

Let me be clear about my own views (or my own bias). I think the FPTP system is antiquated and fails to ensure the fundamental principle that all votes are equal. I strongly favour some form of proportional representation, as long as it is not pure PR, for reasons I will set out below.

“Nobody goes to vote thinking his or her ballot won’t be counted. People expect that a party with more votes should get more seats, and that parties with roughly equal levels of support should be awarded a similar number of seats.”
- Pilon, D. (2007). *The Politics of Voting: Reforming Canada’s Electoral System*. Emond Montgomery Publications.

What’s Wrong with First Past the Post?

FPTP is a system of voting referred to as “majoritarian.” There are two forms of majoritarian voting – FPTP and ranked or preferential ballots. Initially invented back in the 12th century, when people thought the earth was flat, FPTP works well when there are only two candidates. Whoever gets the most votes has clearly been elected.

However, in a country like Canada, where since the 1920s we have had a multiple party system with 3-5 national parties winning seats in Parliament, the FPTP system produces very perverse results.

Retired political scientist, Professor Emeritus Peter Russell has pointed out that only FPTP allows a minority of the voters to elect a majority of the seats. Russell coined the term for this: “a false majority.”

A fundamental principle of our democracy should be that every vote counts equally.

Since the 1920s, Canada has had thirteen false majority governments. The current Liberal majority is a false majority with a popular vote of 39.47%. The previous Conservative majority was also a false majority, elected in 2011 with 39.62% of the vote. It is worrying to know that every vote does not count. In riding after riding, when an MP can win with 30% of the vote, that leaves 70% of the votes “orphaned.”

When voters feel that their vote will make no difference to the outcome, they are less likely to vote. This is referred to as the “effectiveness” of a vote. If five people in a room are told they can vote on where they go for dinner, everyone is likely to vote. Every vote will make a difference. If 10,000 people are at a McDonald’s convention, the vegetarians are unlikely to feel motivated to vote about what will be on the menu!

On average, countries with some form of proportional representation have 7% higher voter turnout than those voting with FPTP or ranked ballots (“majoritarian” voting systems).

I have also come to believe that FPTP makes politics nastier. The so-called wedge issues, or “dog-whistle” politics, are designed to move people to vote from fear or anger. Trying to keep your party’s vote solid while using “voter suppression techniques” (even legal ones, such as attack ads) to reduce another party’s vote is reinforced by FPTP voting. Cooperation is also discouraged. The constant fear of a strategic vote moving from your base to vote for another party – to stop a worse choice – has the effect of making parties act like teams in an endless competition. To suggest another party has a good idea, could risk bleeding your vote to another. FPTP makes it very difficult to forge consensus.

Only three modern democracies still use First Past the Post – the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada. All the others use some form of PR – proportional representation.



Mayne Island Town Hall



Pender Island Town Hall



Galiano Island Town Hall



Salt Spring Island Town Hall

What are the alternatives to FPTP?

Once we agree it will benefit fairer voting, higher voter turn out and less toxic politics if we get rid of FPTP, what are the alternatives?

Ranked Ballots/Preferential Voting:

One system has very similar results to FPTP. It is another system of majoritarian voting called ranked or preferential ballots or instant runoff voting. In other words, it is another form of “winner take all.”

Voters can vote for more than one candidate, ranking them by preference. A set percentage is set. No candidate can win until he or she achieves that set percentage. In some countries, this can lead to two rounds of voting. In others, the system is designed as an “instant runoff.” If the front-runner falls short of votes, the counting moves to the second choice votes.

According to research cited by Fair Vote Canada, 95-98% of the time ranked ballots produce the same results as FPTP. According to an analysis by CBC News, if the 2015 election had been held with a ranked ballot system, the number of Liberal seats (even with the same minority of the popular vote) would have grown from 184 seats to 224! (“Change to preferential ballot would benefit Liberals” Eric Grenier, CBC News, November 26, 2015).

No wonder so many pundits predict the Liberals will move to ranked ballots!

In Australia’s lower house, they use this system. It has not produced different results from FPTP. Australia’s Senate is elected by a system of proportional representation. It consistently produces results closer to how Australians actually voted.

Proportional Representation:

The category of proportional representation embraces a wide range of systems, with almost infinitely possible variations to meet national conditions. The essence of proportional representation is evident in its name: the votes cast for different parties in an election are reflected in the proportion of legislators elected.

Some systems of PR allow for a local MP to represent a specific constituency. Others do not.

Pure Proportional Representation

When people want to attack PR, they almost always invoke the voting in Israel and Italy as systems Canada would never want to emulate. Israel and Italy vote using pure PR. Pure PR involves voting solely for a party – not for a local candidate. A threshold is selected. In Israel it is 3.25% of the popular vote. Any party getting more than 3.25% will win seats in the Knesset.

In Italy, the threshold is even lower – 3%. Recently Italy adopted a major new reform. While voting is still based on pure PR, they now allow any party achieving 40% of the popular vote to receive a minimum of 340 seats – or 54% of the Chamber of Deputies. If no party achieves 40%, there is a second round of voting. It is interesting that Italy’s new reform reserves 12 seats to represent Italians living abroad.

Italy and Israel have been typified by unstable governments. Politics has been volatile. And no link exists between the member elected and any specific constituency. For these reasons, I have not heard any advocate of PR support using pure PR in Canada. I certainly oppose it.

Continued on page 4.

Your opinion matters!

What matters to you is important to me, and I want to know your priorities!

Please take a moment to answer the questions on the right, cut along the dotted line, and mail your opinion back to me postage free. You can also go to my MP website www.elizabethmaymp.ca and complete the survey online.

If you have more than one person in your home, feel free to contact my constituency office in Sidney at 250-657-2000 to get additional copies of the survey mailed to you.

Thank you!

Do you support equal and fair voting by proportional representation?

Yes No Not Sure

Do you agree that it can be done without a referendum?

Yes No Not Sure

What is your preferred voting method? (check one)

FPTP MMP STV A Hybrid PR Ranked Ballot

Do you think we should make voting mandatory?

Yes No Not Sure

Do you think we should reduce the voting age?

Yes No Not Sure

What are the alternatives to FPTP? - continued

Systems of Proportional Representation that allow an MP to be linked to a specific constituency:

Mixed Member Proportional

In Mixed Member Proportional (MMP), voters vote for the candidate in their electoral district just as we do now. When all the votes are counted, MPs are elected as under FPTP – but that does not end the matter.

Once individual MPs are elected, the popular vote for each party is taken into consideration. Usually a second group of seats are set aside. These “at large” seats are used to redress the imbalances created by FPTP. So, where a party gets 40% of the vote but the majority of seats, that “false majority” is corrected by adding MPs for other parties underrepresented by FPTP in the at large seats.

The main criticism of this system has been that in countries where it is in use (such as Germany and New Zealand) the source of new MPs for the at large seats comes from a list developed by each party. The criticism has been that it gives political parties more control. In New Zealand, the Greens make the process of being nominated to a party list more onerous than winning a local nomination, so that does re balance the control by party back room operatives.

One way to “democratize” the list would be to choose new MPs from those in an underrepresented party who came closest to winning a seat under FPTP, but lost narrowly.

Another criticism is that in making this transition, more MPs have to be added to Parliament – or riding boundaries have to be recalculated to have more voters in each district to create seats available for the at large MPs.

It is clear from the use of MMP that the governments elected are stable and effective in governance. While it is often asserted that a majority government can never be elected under MMP, that is not the case. It is true that coalition governments are more common under MMP than FPTP. This has contributed to a more collaborative style of politics. In New Zealand, where the voting system switched from FPTP to MMP in the mid-1990s, there have been a number of coalition governments. The time between elections has actually been longer than in the series of minority governments Canadians experienced since 2000. Recently, New Zealand held a referendum to ask whether voters wanted to keep MMP or go back to FPTP. Overwhelmingly, voters expressed a preference for the new system.

Single Transferable Vote

British Columbians should be familiar with Single Transferable Vote (STV). We have had two referendum votes of the idea of moving from FPTP to STV (2005 and 2009).

The idea of STV is that it is very easy to vote and no vote goes uncounted. The tricky part is explaining it!

The essence of the idea is that a number of electoral districts are clustered. One could imagine a cluster on southern Vancouver Island of Saanich-Gulf Islands, Victoria, Esquimalt-Saanich-Sooke, and Cowichan-Malahat-Langford. With four ridings clustered, every voter would be able to vote five candidates in ranked ballots, expressing a choice for your first choice in your traditional riding and then choosing other candidates you would like to see in Parliament. Then the votes would be counted against a set percentage required to win. Or you could vote for the party of your choice down the line. A very popular candidate would be elected relatively quickly, so then the ballots would be counted with the votes moving the 2nd choice to 1st - wherever the first choice had already been declared elected.

STV is used in Ireland, Malta and the Australian senate. It has the advantage of ensuring every MP has a connection to a particular area. It also eliminates the need to add new seats or rely on a party list. It is often suggested it is advantageous to be able to get MPs of different parties from the same cluster to compete with each other in providing good service to their constituents -- the hardest working MP in any cluster having an electoral advantage next time.

The disadvantage in a country with the vast geography of Canada is obvious. How do you cluster huge and remote ridings? Do Yukon, NWT and Nunavut belong together? There are tens of thousands of kilometers between voters.

A Hybrid PR system for Canada

Many will advance tweaks on MMP and STV to adjust for Canada's particular regional particularities.

Stéphane Dion, currently Minister of Foreign Affairs, has advanced a system he believes will better accommodate regional differences. He calls it a P3 System for “proportional-preferential-personalized” vote. He proposes electing five MPs by riding through clusters as in STV. As a tweak he suggests fewer in areas that are large geographically and have low population density. Even within this, he agrees there may need to be exceptions — such as the territories which would remain one-member districts. This would allow the number of seats to remain the same; what would be reduced is the number of ridings.

The voting process would be essentially the same as that described for STV above, but with a focus on party votes as the count goes on. The count would focus on the party choice more than the individual candidate by name.

As Dion's website explains it: “The second and subsequent choices of the eliminated parties would be allocated until all of the parties still in the running obtain a least one seat. This produces the vote percentages that will determine the number of seats obtained by the various parties... The greatest advantage of P3, in the Canadian federal context, is that it would correct the artificially-increased regional concentration of political party support. P3 would correct this harmful regional distortion, because it would be difficult for a party to win more than three seats out of five in a riding. Thus, seats would be truly up for grabs in all ridings, even in the most Conservative ones in Alberta and the most Liberal ones in Toronto and Montreal.”

Dion is clearly motivated by his concern over the emergence and persistence of the Bloc Québécois. Just as FPTP hurts truly national parties attempting to gain traction, such as the Greens, it rewards parties mobilizing on regionally-based and divisive politics, like the Bloc Québécois.

Jean-Pierre Kingsley, Chief Electoral Officer for Elections Canada from 1990 til 2007 recently spoke at a session on electoral reform on Parliament Hill. He strongly supported the government's commitment to get rid of FPTP as a major and significant reform. He proposed his own tweak on STV, not unlike that suggested by Stéphane Dion, but without the priority around parties. He proposed leaving rural and remote ridings alone, to continue to vote under FPTP, while clustering wherever possible. He suggested five MPs per riding, ensuring no one could be elected without 15% of the vote for the whole cluster. Kingsley noted his idea is one of many possible variations.



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