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Chair

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia

Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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● (1410)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

I'd like to start by welcoming everyone this morning. First of all, thank you to everyone sitting in the audience for being here. We have a good turnout. It's a sign of a strong interest in this issue and in our democracy. Thank you, and congratulations for being here.

We apologize for the delay. The flight from Montreal to Ottawa had to turn back because of fog in Ottawa.

A voice: There's never fog in Ottawa.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: At any rate, we're here now. This is the 24th meeting of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform. The format today is that each of the two presenters will present for 10 minutes. We'll see how it goes, but we may go to the second group of presenters right away, for 10 minutes each. Then we'll have a question-and-answer session, the public session, from 4:15 to 5 o'clock. After each set of presentations, there will be one round of questions from members, at five minutes each. That includes the answer. Both fit into the five-minute time slot.

We have with us this afternoon Mr. Michael Boda, the Chief Electoral Officer of Saskatchewan.

Thank you very much for being here, Mr. Boda, and for taking part in the discussion on the important topic of electoral reform.

We also have Professor Charles Smith from St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan. We thank him as well for being here.

Perhaps we could start with Mr. Boda for 10 minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michael Boda (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Saskatchewan): Thank you.

I would like to thank you for the invitation to appear today before the Special Committee on Electoral Reform.

I would like to reiterate my interest in the topics being addressed here that aim to measure the strength of democracy in Canada and determine how the federal electoral process can contribute.

I am very interested in the discussion you have launched across the country and in the efforts you have made to strengthen and solidify our nation's democratic values for the decades to come.

[*English*]

Not unlike Canada's Chief Electoral Officer, Marc Mayrand, who heads Elections Canada and oversees federal electoral events, I am responsible for overseeing Saskatchewan's provincial electoral events as head of Elections Saskatchewan. The mandate of my office includes managing an ongoing register of voters, regulating political parties and the finances of candidates, ensuring an appropriate level of readiness for conducting both scheduled and on-demand electoral events, and acting as a secretariat to our boundary commission. However, unlike my federal counterparts, I also hold investigatory responsibilities akin to those of the Commissioner of Canada Elections, Yves Côté.

From the outset, I must make it clear to members that while I'm very interested in supporting the work of your committee, I'm also one of 14 chief electoral officers in the country. In my role as a professional election administrator, it would not be appropriate for me to make recommendations on what electoral system should be selected for Canada's federal elections or to offer any assessment on the various electoral systems you have under consideration.

At this point in your deliberations, I expect that you will have already surmised that senior Canadian election professionals are quite serious about neutrality. I know that a number of my colleagues have declined your invitation to appear for that very reason. Within our role, we are intentional about not offering views on matters that sit clearly within the purview of legislators, and that includes offering an answer with respect to questions of what the best electoral system is for Canadians. Our job is instead to advise on making workable whatever system legislators and governments choose and to facilitate an ongoing examination and understanding of how the legal definition of the chosen system can be appropriately modified, as it inevitably needs to evolve within an ever-changing society.

Similarly, it wouldn't be appropriate for me to make recommendations on adopting or rejecting compulsory voting, a question of public policy for legislators to decide, but I do have some views on making such arrangements workable in the Canadian context.

On the topic of online voting, as Chief Electoral Officer it is not for me to advise on whether the time is right to proceed. It would be my role instead to offer insights on how promising new methods of voting may also present new types of challenges to an election system's integrity.

While I was born and raised in the province, prior to my appointment here in Saskatchewan in 2012, I spent two previous decades in the academy, and in conducting and assessing electoral events in both developing democracies such as Pakistan and Ghana and in established democracies such as Scotland and the United States. In light of this, I may be able to offer you some comparative insight with respect to electoral system implementation. I will need to apologize in advance if I'm simply unable to answer your questions. There's a bit of a self-editing process that's a requirement in my role as a senior election administrator, although my caution may be more than compensated for by the freedom of academic expression that my panel colleague, Dr. Charles Smith, enjoys.

Let me turn first to the topic of electoral systems.

● (1415)

In your efforts to evaluate the systems available to you, I encourage you to think about how many changes—and how any changes—may influence the engagement of citizens.

Election administrators tend to focus on service to the voter and on ensuring their experience at each polling place is positive and efficient. As committee members, you have the opportunity to think more broadly about the impact an electoral system can have on public participation. The decline in voter participation, not just in Canada but across western democracies, is well documented, and I share the concerns that have been expressed about the legitimacy of governance being at risk if this trend continues unabated. When looking at the electoral system alternatives available to you, you might consider whether a particular system would serve as a disincentive to voting participation, potentially introducing new barriers to voting as an unintended consequence, or whether it would provide incentives for participation and minimize administrative barriers to accessing the ballot.

Election administrators are universally concerned that all eligible voters have reasonable access to the ballot and that voting integrity provisions are kept efficient and do not have an unduly disenfranchising effect. Making voting easier, not harder, and adopting an electoral system that has an enduring tendency to encourage voting participation might be one of a combination of factors that would help to reverse the decline of Canadian voting participation rates. Across the country, first nations are just one example of a group that has not traditionally been engaged in electoral democracy and could be much better accommodated with improved ballot access.

I'm not here to tell you which electoral system would afford greater or lesser results in this regard, but I do believe that the legitimacy of governance becomes questionable when we see levels of participation drop to 50% of eligible voters or less. Those selecting a new electoral system I hope will keep this in mind.

As you consider making changes to our system, perhaps I can offer some tangible advice based on my experience.

In 2007 I served as deputy reviewer and director of the review of the Scottish parliamentary and local government elections. I believe the review of those elections offers good insights to your committee in what it points out and in what to avoid when implementing change to an electoral system. It also points to certain elements of the nuts and bolts of the election as a system itself.

In a nutshell, the Scottish experience showed that too much legislative change was introduced in too little time to incorporate it well. Roles, relationships, and accountability for coordination were not adequately defined. The combination of local government and parliamentary elections using a different electoral system and ballot design for each led to challenges for the voters. Ballot design was given too little attention and left too late in the process. Public education on a new voting process under two electoral systems was launched too late and was inadequate in scope. Also, voters were overlooked in the reform process, leading to disastrous consequences, with spoiled ballots and a significant erosion in public trust regarding the election process.

In light of this experience, as you consider making recommendations on important innovations to our electoral system, my advice would be to ensure adequate time is available for system change. Don't require too much change too quickly. An election is like a ship, not a speedboat; it can definitely turn, but not quickly. Also, ensure there is a mandate for a good public education process associated with any new system.

As I've noted, I'm deeply concerned about the decline in democratic engagement and voter participation in our country. Despite this and because of my required neutrality on what might be considered a partisan topic, I'm not going to offer a view on mandatory voting, but I do have some administrative design suggestions in the event your committee decides to move in that direction.

I would suggest that mandatory voting needs to be accompanied with mandatory voter registration and that registration should become automatic. This means that anyone who's eligible to vote must register and keep their registration current with regard to the details of their physical address, residence, mailing address, and any change in name.

● (1420)

Automatic registration would involve the state ensuring that a record for every eligible voter would be created through an automated mechanism and would be maintained without the voter needing to be involved. Admittedly, this would be a major administrative undertaking. Recent reports out of Australia have indicated that voluntary registration has been highly ineffective, even though registration has been mandatory there for many decades, and, of course, if a voter isn't registered, they can't be fined for not having voted.

This leads to the tricky aspect of having effective enforcement mechanisms for both mandatory registration and mandatory voting. In Australia the penalty for not registering to vote is $170, but it is discretionary and is waived once the person registers to vote. Failure to vote can result in a $20 penalty, unless a valid and sufficient reason is supplied to the Australian Electoral Commission and they waive that fine. Officially, the turnout rates in Australia are 94%, but this doesn't factor in the absence of more than one million of the 17 million eligible voters from their electoral role. Actual turnout is likely somewhat less than 90%.

The other question that needs to be asked is whether mandatory voting participation enforces meaningful democratic engagement. Australia has resorted to printing rotating ballots, where the choice order changes for each ballot issued to a lineup of voters.

The Chair: Mr. Boda, would you be able to conclude in about 60 seconds? There will be questions afterward on your testimony.

Mr. Michael Boda: This was a direct response to the fact that studies show that having positions at the top or bottom of the ballot led to a disproportionate amount of support from what is termed “the donkey vote” in Australia. Basically, the donkey vote is those votes cast by citizens who have no interest in the election but do not want to be fined for not having voted.

For my final topic I was going to have a discussion on online voting. I would be happy to answer questions on that topic.

In essence, I raise a lot of questions with respect to online voting. I would point you to the recent report published by Dr. Keith Archer, the Chief Electoral Officer of British Columbia. He offered some excellent insights on the risks that are there, but at the same time he offered some positive comments on how there might be a way forward, and I'm in agreement with those comments. I do have some concerns about authentication, and particularly with vote secrecy as it relates to online voting and auditability.

I'll leave you with this. I often point to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and if you focus on the principles laid out there, especially when it comes to online voting, there isn't a principle of convenience. It focuses on the secrecy of the ballot, and I think that is something we have to focus on initially. This isn't to say that there's not going to be an online system available going forward.

I'm excited about the future. I think there are innovations and processes that we can pursue, but I am very concerned about the secrecy of the ballot.

With that, I'll conclude.

The Chair: I have a feeling there will be many questions regarding online voting, because as a chief electoral officer you would have particular insight on that, among other things.

We'll go now to Professor Smith for 10 minutes, please.

Professor Charles Smith (Associate Professor, St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan, As an Individual): Thank you, and thank you for allowing me to come to speak with you today. I really love the button you have that silences the microphone. I'm sure many of my students would like to have a similar button. Thank you again.

I appreciate the leadership of this committee in allowing me to come to speak with you today. I address the question of voting system reform a little differently from some of the presenters who have come before me. I've been following quite closely all of the presenters before your committee. I love the online tool; that's great.

I'm more a political historian than I am a scholar of voting system reform, but I have a vested interest in this issue in the sense that I've been quite active in organizations such as Fair Vote Canada.

In my own research I examine the way groups in Canadian society —often marginalized groups—struggle to influence change or alter governments and government policies. Specifically, the questions I'm interested in are how governments can be held to greater account and, as a common question in contemporary political governance, how governments and legal institutions can be held to a higher level of transparency.

There are two arguments or areas I'd like to cover today. One is the historical question that has been presented to this committee as defence of the status quo, and the other is how I think the current voting system hides or distorts existing social cleavages. I'm going to use the example of Saskatchewan. Since you're in Saskatchewan, I thought that might be relevant for you.

On the historical question, on a normal level I begin with the observation that the current electoral system fails because it does not place voters at the centre of its institutional functioning. In fact, SMP or first past the post as a model very much originates in a pre-democratic era that was constructed by male propertied elites.

Critically examining the origins of the system is important, because opponents of voting system reform make the case, the odd observation—and I've seen some of my learned colleagues on this committee make it—that Canada's 150-year existence owes at least some of its stability and effectiveness as a democracy to the voting system. I'm curious about these arguments and curious about how they come about, as they seem to ignore the many historical injustices that have been done in the name of the Canadian state by elites, who did so largely with little accountability to the masses of Canadian society. Here you can point to the slow opening of suffrage to workers, women, people of colour, and indigenous Canadians.

My point here is not say that SMP leads directly to these historical injustices but to say that if defenders of the status quo want to equate SMP with Canada's 150-year history, they may have to own both the good and the bad of that history. I have yet to hear a clear historical account presented to this committee that effectively links how they see Canada today—as a bilingual, multi-cultural, open, and somewhat transparent government and society—with the voting system. The reason I think you haven't heard that is that such an account does not exist; in fact, it could not exist, because the argument has no basis in historical fact.

If you were to understand how Canada moved from a colonial, constitutional monarchy run by white male propertied elites to what it is today, you would need to look past the voting system and actually see the voting system as an obstacle. We've achieved great things in this country despite our voting system, not because of it. Different groups have fought to be heard despite the barriers placed in the way by our voting system, a system that has suppressed competition and poorly represented our political and demographic diversity.

The historical record shows that our voting system has been kept in place not for any of the loftier quasi-functional reasons offered by some defenders of the status quo but for reasons of power: it has served the two main governing parties well. That, I want to point out, is not an indictment of the modern version of those two parties in 2016, but a reminder that the real history of SMP is one that almost always blocked new ideas and the fair and representative account of the great social, political, and economic questions of our time.

Recognizing that, I would encourage members of the committee to understand the voting system as the product of political struggle. It's not divorced from political struggle; it is part of that struggle. SMP is firmly rooted in the 19th-century understanding of political power, one that is against diversity, pluralism, and, frankly, democracy. I think we can do better.

I believe this committee has a unique opportunity to craft a voting system for our 21st-century understanding of political power, and that such a system should put the voting public at the centre of its reason for being or raison d'être—and that's my one French account, because my French has fallen by the wayside since I lived in Quebec. I agree with Liberal MP Mark Holland, who said that every vote should count and that Canadians' views should be represented more accurately.

We are at a historical turning point, I believe, and I applaud the leadership of this committee for the work that it is doing. It's so rare that a sitting government agrees to examine this key aspect of our democracy. In going forward, I think it is crucial that this committee privilege a reform that will accurately reflect what Canadians say with their votes and will better represent the diversity of this country. Research shows—and this is clear—that when people are not at the table, when they're not present for the discussion, their issues and concerns are not really taken seriously. This is no longer acceptable in 2016.

● (1425)

Here I want to look a little bit at Saskatchewan. I think the current voting system actually distorts existing social cleavages and can lead to a false impression about what a place is actually saying when they vote. We examined how people voted in Saskatchewan over the past few elections, and it became pretty clear that our current voting system consistently does a poor job of reflecting what people have said with their votes.

In 2015 the Conservatives won 48.5% of the popular vote in Saskatchewan and they won 10 seats. Clearly, many people are sympathetic to what the Conservatives stand for in this province, but that 48.5% translated into 71% of the seats. The Liberals won 24.6% during the vote but only one seat—we call that Mr. Goodale's seat—in Saskatchewan. The NDP won 25.1% and three seats, or 21% of the seats. That's actually the best result in over a decade.

We examined elections from 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2011. The results are very lopsided, often giving all or nearly all of the seats to just one party, even though half or more than half of Saskatchewan's voters supported somebody else.

I have a chart in my notes, which I think was given to you. If you look at the numbers, you see a pretty devastating critique of our current voting system. The Liberals won 27.5% of the vote in 2004 and one seat, or 7% of the seats. In 2011 the New Democrats won 32.3% of the popular vote in the province and did not win a single seat.

The Conservatives obviously are a favourite of many voters in this province. In 2011 they won 56.3% of the vote, more than a majority, but 93% of the seats. What does that tell us when commentators look at Saskatchewan? They say, well, it's a very Conservative place, and clearly they want Conservative policies—but do they? These lopsided results misrepresent what's going on in the province and present a false picture to the rest of the country about who we are and what we believe. This can't be good for national unity or inter-regional co-operation. How can our political parties do their job of bridging the differences in this country if they're not represented accurately when they have this support?

The story doesn't end there. As of the 2011 census—I'm eagerly awaiting the next census to update some of these numbers—Saskatchewan has the second-largest indigenous population, as a percentage of the population, of all the provinces. If we assume that the population has not increased since 2011—it has, but let's assume it hasn't—15.6% of Saskatchewan's people are indigenous, but in the past two elections only two indigenous MPs have been elected from this province. In both of those cases, it's in the same riding in the north.

Justin Trudeau has said that we need to reset our relationship with indigenous peoples. Getting more indigenous peoples to the table to speak to their own concerns directly would seem to be a pretty important first step. This is particularly important, I believe, for indigenous people who live in urban areas. Half of the indigenous people in Saskatchewan live in urban centres, we're told by Statistics Canada. That would suggest that indigenous voices from urban centres are not represented in the voting system.

Following the TRC recommendations last year, it seems clear to me that there is a unique opportunity for this committee to expand accessibility and inclusiveness to the federal Parliament. During the questions, we could talk about how other jurisdictions have done that. Specifically, I was reading up on how the Maori were represented in New Zealand after the adoption of proportional representation.

I believe a reform to a more proportional system has the potential to transfer voice and power to indigenous communities, both on reserve and in urban centres, so that these voices can be heard. Saskatchewan is a diverse place, and I think it is time we had a voting system that reflects our diversity.

Thank you.

● (1430)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor Smith. You touched on some good points that I think will stimulate debate this afternoon.

We'll do a five-minute round of questions now and then go to our second group of witnesses.

We'll start with Mr. DeCourcey for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matt DeCourcey (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all my colleagues who have returned for this committee's work.

[*English*]

It's great to be here in Regina, all the way from Fredericton, New Brunswick, to meet with witnesses who are here today and with folks from the community who have come out to join us. I agree with the comments made by both our presenters today on the importance of engaging Canadians in this conversation—I thank them very much for that—and of ensuring we can effectively have the voices of Canadians reflected within the electoral system, within their Parliament, and within their system of governance.

Something we've heard about for the last number of months now is the challenge in balancing the different values that we want to see reflected in the system.

Professor Smith, I'll start with you. One thing you mentioned was the value that Canadians place on holding government to account. I think a counterpoint to that is the way that communities hold their local representatives to account. I wonder if you can speak a bit on the importance of local representation as reflected in the electoral system. I know that I feel it acutely in the community that I have the honour of representing. I wonder how people in Regina, Saskatoon, or rural areas of this province understand that value of local representation within their electoral system.

● (1435)

Prof. Charles Smith: We can look at a bunch of different areas. Your question is multi-faceted, so we could go on.

Ridings change. They are often arbitrarily decided. I think the community itself is abstract. Historically, the local riding connection was quite abstract. It depends on how far you want to go back. In the 19th century, Canada had mixed member ridings. There were two members per riding, and they borrowed that from Britain. That changed over time.

What I'm trying to say is that the concept of the evolution of representation has changed over time. When we look at the current model of elections, we see there's no question that Canadians place value on local representation. If I have a problem because my CPP isn't coming through, then I can call you up and ask if you can help me out. There is a connection there, but I don't see how electoral reform of any of the models that are presented to the committee, whether it's a proportional system or an alternative ballot system, would somehow erode the relationship between individuals and their elected representatives. In fact, wouldn't it open it up?

We can see representation as an evolution, and not something that's been fixed over time. We see all the time that parties parachute candidates into ridings who don't have any organic connection to the riding. My point is that it's changing over time. There's no one direct, fixed moment when citizens say, “This is my riding and my representative.” My argument would be that it's fixed, and it doesn't mean it can't be changed.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Do you think there is a manageable size or an outside number of electors that a riding representative can effectively represent, given the demands placed on parliamentarians, in the way they connect with their community? I'd like the thoughts of Mr. Boda, who has worked extensively in an international sphere, and Professor Smith.

Mr. Michael Boda: I wouldn't be able to give you a number; however, I think that each electoral system has its challenges when it comes to local representation.

On the first-past-the-post side, there is discussion of how much local representation there is, but on the proportional representation side, it's the same issue. In South Africa, for their first democratic election, they implemented a proportional system. By the time they were to their second election, they were already questioning whether there was a proper connection between the local citizens and their representatives because of the proportional representation approach. They were wondering whether the proportional representation approach should be reformed.

I can't give you the number you're looking for, but no matter the system, there is the issue of local representation. That is, I understand, one of your five guiding principles in the work that you're doing, so obviously it's very important to this committee.

The Chair: Go ahead, Professor Smith.

Prof. Charles Smith: I would agree with that comment. Through Canadian history, the relationship between the local and the federal representative has been paramount. I would argue that there are multiple systems that can perform representation.

In terms of size, geographic size seems to be no boundary in Canadian history, and some of our ridings are bigger than most countries in Europe, but in terms of population, as you know, it's fixed by the Constitution, so it seems that we could work around those numbers to keep representation effective.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Reid now.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you very much.

I have two questions for Dr. Boda. Depending upon how fast I am and how fast he is, we'll possibly have time for a question for Professor Smith.

Dr. Boda, as a starting point, I want to ask you about your experience in Scotland. You mentioned that the implementation was problematic because there was too much change all at once, and that was an issue. Specifically, I know that MMP was being introduced at the level of the Scottish Parliament, and I know that in Scotland they have also introduced a new system of voting at the municipal level. Were they both done at the same time? Is that where the problem lay?

Mr. Michael Boda: You're referencing the 2007 electoral process in which they brought together the Scottish parliamentary balloting at the same time as local government and they were using two different electoral systems. I was thinking about this earlier, and it's not usual for me to quote pop culture, but I was reminded of *Smokey and the Bandit* when they said they had a long way to go and a short time to get there. In Scotland, that could pretty much sum it up. There was a lot of change in a very short period of time.

When we went through the process and appeared before a Westminster committee, I think the exact same question was asked of me, which was whether it had to do with the electoral system itself. You could have a look at the report that I wrote it with Ron Gould, who was the lead reviewer. He was the former assistant chief electoral officer of Canada. We identified many changes that had been made, and it was really a matter of lack of focus as to who had the authority to make the changes combined with many changes being made as we went through the process.

To answer your question, I think it's much broader than simply an electoral system change.

● (1440)

Mr. Scott Reid: I ask that because one of the options that is out there, one of the ones that generates the most interest, is a system that is relatively closely parallel to the one in Scotland.

I was trying to figure out whether you were expressing concerns that this particular system generated too much change or whether you were saying that it was many things all at once. I think it's the latter of those two that you were saying. Am I right about that?

Mr. Michael Boda: The latter being...sorry?

Mr. Scott Reid: It was that several things were going on at once. They were changing to the multi-member proportional system and changing several other things at the same time.

Mr. Michael Boda: That is correct.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. I just wanted to make sure of that.

I want to ask you another question that relates to your redistribution process. One thing that has been presented as a barrier to achieving the government's stated goal of introducing a new electoral system by 2019 is that it takes about two years at the federal level to go through a redistribution process. This has to be factored in. We now are basically three years from an election, with two years for redistribution. The danger is that it may become impossible to achieve any system that involves redistribution, as may be the case with mixed member plurality and the single transferable vote, in time for the next election.

Is there a way of doing redistribution in a more timely fashion? Are we dragging it out longer at the federal level than you do in Saskatchewan?

Mr. Michael Boda: I'm going to have to yield to Mr. Mayrand and what he had indicated. The number he put forward—correct me if I'm wrong—was 24 months to conduct that process. They don't take offering those dates lightly, and I don't either. They will have gone through a serious exercise in order to come up with the estimate of 24 months.

I can tell you that it is an extensive process. I can only speak from the point of view of Saskatchewan. Once you go through the process of establishing the boundaries, that is really less than half of the work that has to happen. Then you still have to go through the process of establishing polling divisions, which takes a lot of work.

Mr. Scott Reid: Would you be able to submit to our clerk a copy of the report you helped to write regarding Scotland so that we could get it translated and circulated to members of the committee?

Mr. Michael Boda: I can certainly do that.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Cullen now.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both, gentlemen, for being here. This is very good. It's a polarity in terms of presentations, if you've got strong opinions on what happens next and strong opinions on how we need to consider change.

Let me start with you, Dr. Boda.

I have one question on donkey voting, which is one of my new favourite terms but doesn't say much about the elector. It's the idea that if you have a voting system whereby voters rank candidates, then voters will start numbering down. Do you have any sense out of the countries that use this system—and there are not that many—if it is 1% of cases? Is it 5%?

It's not the result we were hoping to get. We want people to be informed and make choices and make a better choice with whatever new voting system we bring in. Do you have any sense of that out of Australia or other places as to how prevalent it is?

● (1445)

Mr. Michael Boda: I am not an expert on the Australian electoral system, so I wouldn't want to offer you a number. I know it is a problem and it is what led to the different approach to balloting that took place there.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: They mix it up or have randomized ballots, in a sense, so not all ballots look the same to a voter. That way, even if people donkey vote, you're not just going to get the first candidate on the top of every list? Is that right?

Mr. Michael Boda: That's correct. As a result, it won't have an impact on the outcome.

Now this being said, the randomization of ballots is not only caused by donkey voting; the literature will tell you there are other reasons for randomizing.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Right, because the first candidate has the preference.

Mr. Michael Boda: That's what the literature will tell you—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It's 3% in some studies.

Mr. Michael Boda: Yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: On the question of online voting, I know you're not bringing an opinion as to whether we ought to or not. Am I framing the question correctly in suggesting that it's a risk-versus-benefit test that we should be putting to this as a committee, in that there are benefits offered with allowing voters to vote online and there are also risks? Is that a fair way to try to describe this option for Canada?

Mr. Michael Boda: It's one way to frame it.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Okay.

Mr. Michael Boda: I would be content with having a discussion over that.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: You see, you talked about integrity, which is one of the guiding principles of this committee. We have to come up with a voting system that can maintain the integrity of the results. What challenges are presented from what you know that we should be made aware of with regard to online voting and the integrity of the system?

Mr. Michael Boda: What challenges are there?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes.

Mr. Michael Boda: You mentioned integrity and you mentioned accessibility. Whether you're talking about online voting or about voting in person, those are two things that I'm constantly balancing —integrity and accessibility—with secrecy being very important there.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Let me just ask this. In the countries that use this system, how does one guarantee that the ballot has been cast secretly and without persuasion if it is done on a smart phone?

Mr. Michael Boda: Presently there is no certainty of that. Someone can be looking over your shoulder. If you're in an Internet café, someone can be there. If you're voting at home, you could be coerced by another member of your family.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I'll turn to Professor Smith for a moment.

In terms of how long we've been at this—I just did a quick search because I admit I didn't know—Parliament has been debating this question for as long as the University of Saskatchewan has existed. The next time you're walking the halls, in the ivy and whatnot.... We've been at this for a little under 100 years; the school is a bit older than that.

In your preamble, your opening, you talked about how this first-past-the-post system, the status quo, has nothing inherent in it. You said that Canada has done well not because of it, but despite it. Can you elaborate on that?

Prof. Charles Smith: Well, it's interesting to look at how government has changed. We're approaching our 150th anniversary, and almost all of our institutions have changed except for the voting system. The Constitution has changed. Who can sit in Parliament has changed. The number of MPs has changed. Our court system has changed and evolved in terms of what judges do and how much power they have.

When you look at the voting system, you see it hasn't changed. You could make the argument on the one hand that it's because it works so well and everyone's happy with it, or you can make the argument, which is what I believe, that when you look at how things have changed—at how we've achieved, for instance, universal suffrage—you see that it wasn't handed down from on high, from parliamentarians, with all due respect to the expertise of the parliamentarians on this committee: it was done by very dedicated social activists who took the task upon themselves, and they often put their bodies on the line to fight for political change, just as with LGBT rights or workers' rights. The expansion of the ballot over time wasn't handed to them; it was taken by people exerting pressure.

Look at how people have tried to organize for change through the political process. Parties often have a very difficult time because they don't have a regional base. Look at one of the dominant questions of our time, climate change. You have a party, the Green Party, that puts it at the centre of its agenda, but it doesn't have a regional base; it has a broad national base. It's very small, so it doesn't have much representation in Parliament, so—

● (1450)

The Chair: Actually, I let it go much longer because it was an interesting question and a good answer. I think it's something we needed to clarify.

Prof. Charles Smith: I'm sorry.

The Chair: No, it's fine. Go full steam ahead, and we'll worry about the time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ste-Marie, you have the floor.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie (Joliette, BQ): Thank you, gentlemen. Thank you for coming to speak to us today. Welcome. I would also like to welcome the colleagues I am pleased to see here, in Regina. I would also like to extend a particular welcome to the members of the public who are here to listen.

I am the member for Joliette, so I will speak in French. It will be an opportunity to use the interpretation services.

I am pleased to see you and am eager to hear what you have to say tonight. There will be an open mike session. The committee is travelling across Canada to hear what you have to say.

I have many questions and very little time. I will start with Mr. Boda.

You said in your presentation that one of the things you can share with us, that we have heard already, of course, is that good electoral reform takes time. You need to go and see people, take the time to speak with them, listen to them, help them understand the system, consult everyone, clearly define each role, each step.

A few months ago, the federal Chief Electoral Officer came to tell us that if we wanted to make good on the government's promise to have a new voting system for the next election, changes would have to be made, the legislation adopted, approved in the Senate, discussed and everything before next spring, May at the latest, if not June.

Do you think that is a realistic deadline for a good reform?

Mr. Michael Boda: I think it will be better if I answer in English. Thank you.

[*English*]

First of all, I have to say how much respect I have for my colleagues in Ottawa. Mr. Mayrand is very good at election administration. He is an election administrator's election administrator, so I will know that he has done his due diligence in terms of laying out what is viable and workable in the context of election administration.

Yes, I did talk about the experience of Scotland and about how there was too much change too quickly. That was my understanding and assessment after the fact. It became very obvious that had been the case. I think Andy O'Neill spoke to you, and he offered that same assessment. He was the head of the electoral commission in Scotland.

Can this be achieved? I believe that if Mr. Mayrand is saying that the transition can be achieved within the timeline for the next election, then it is possible. The question is, from a recommendation standpoint of this committee, are you going to be recommending the right things in terms of the public education campaign?

Obviously there will be a transition if you are changing the electoral system. The mandate of Elections Canada or any election management body needs to be there; they have the capacity to educate the public going forward. Those were some of the things we learned from the Scottish environment.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: I would like to ask Mr. Smith another question.

You spoke about distortions and exclusions relating to social cleavages in the various population categories. A few times, the government has suggested the possibility of adopting a preferential ballot system. In that system, we would have the same ridings, but the member would be elected using a preferential balloting system.

Do you think that kind of system would reduce the distortions and exclusions caused both by the vote cast and the social cleavages, which would seem to be your concern?

● (1455)

Prof. Charles Smith: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Do you mean a ranked ballot, the idea of just changing the ballot?

The ranked ballot is an interesting reform, because now you'll get rid of this idea of false majorities. No candidate will be elected to Parliament who hasn't won 50% of the vote as the first or second or third choice of a voter. I would argue that's a bit of a band-aid solution to a much larger problem. The problem is, whose voices are being represented in Parliament? Under the current system, certain voices are preferred and other voices are silenced, and it will change depending on the region they are from, depending on the balance of power in different groups within society. Francophones are going to be very represented in Quebec, but they're not going to be very represented in Saskatchewan. The ranked ballot does nothing to address that concern.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Ms. May is next.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank everyone for being with us here today in Regina. I see a lot of people in the audience who I know are very committed on many issues, because I've seen them fighting uranium mining and acting on issues related to climate change. I'm hoping that we will have time to hear from a lot of people at our open mike.

In the time I have now to speak to our two witnesses, I wanted to start with you, Dr. Boda, because you're right in saying that our Scottish witnesses did point out to us that their election was a bit of an anomaly because they'd experimented with a different ballot and they'd realized they'd made some mistakes.

I'm trying to remember...Scotland is certainly much more complicated than any other. We've had witnesses from New Zealand, from Australia, from Scotland, from Ireland, and from Germany so far. We've had witnesses appearing by video, if people are worried about the costs. Scotland is the only one where voters deal with four different voting systems. They have single transferable vote for their local councils; then at the other end, they have a pure list system for electing their European member of Parliament, they have an additional member system for their Scottish Parliament, and they're still voting for their Westminster MP with first past the post. They manage this in most election years without difficulty and without confusion.

Did you look at others? You had the personal experience of being in Scotland in what I think was probably their most confused election ever, based on trying a different ballot type. Do you have any observations from any of the other countries we've heard from—New Zealand, Australia, Germany, or Ireland?

Mr. Michael Boda: I can refer to work that I've done in Pakistan and in Jordan, but perhaps Saskatchewan might be a good case study for you. We have just gone through a process of reforming legislation during the last cycle, and we're beginning a process of identifying whether there is an opportunity for reform and modernization in the coming cycle. A theme that we focused on during the last cycle was “not too much too quickly”. As a result, we made only 11 changes—and certainly the electoral system wasn't among them—to the election system in order to run the past general election in April of this past year.

In other cases, I'm not going to say that making changes is a bad thing. I think that innovation can be very effective when you are looking at engaging your voters, so I don't want to go on record as one who suggests that innovation is wrong and that it will be ineffective. What I am saying is that you need to be careful that there is enough time to make the changes you want to make.

In Saskatchewan we're already planning for 2022. You have to be able to focus beyond a single electoral cycle to two or three electoral cycles. It goes back to using that ship metaphor rather than a speedboat metaphor, because it's very applicable in this context.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you.

I think I have enough time to ask another question of Professor Smith.

I took notes on your evidence. I think you said that our current voting system—my problem is with my handwriting—you said it does not place voters at the centre.

It reminded me of something that Professor Pippa Norris from Harvard said when she was answering a question. She said that it depends what you value. If you privilege a system to privilege political parties, you'll want first past the post. If you privilege voters, you'll pick proportional representation.

Are you saying that if you want to put voters at the centre, you change your voting system?

● (1500)

Prof. Charles Smith: In this case, yes. Professor Pippa Norris is someone I quite respect, so she could say it better than I could, but I think the answer is yes. I'm just going to say yes, and now I won't get cut off on the microphone.

I think that when you look at our voting system, you'll see that it puts stability at the centre of its moral or normative claim, but that doesn't mean it puts voters at the centre of its claim.

Ms. Elizabeth May: If I may have a little bit more time, I will quickly go back to you, Mr. Boda.

I know you wanted to say more about online voting. Is there anything you want to fit into 15 seconds?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Michael Boda: You're very kind, sir.

I would add that I think there is an opportunity to do pilots and to look at innovation to include groups that don't have access to the ballot in a meaningful way at this point. If you're looking for opportunities to test online voting, I think that would be the case, but as for implementing a national system at this time for online voting, I'm just not convinced we're there yet.

However, it's a bit like a train going down the track. Online voting is coming. It's just a matter of when it will arrive and when we can account for some of these principles in the international covenant that need to be considered, such as secrecy.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I'm going to summarize your testimony as having to do with ships and trains.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sahota, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Professor Smith, you spoke quite a lot about diversity and aboriginal representation in our Parliament. That's very important to me in particular, and I'm sure to everybody sitting at this committee table.

I was having a very interesting conversation about this aspect just a couple of days ago with a professor at my old university. Her area of expertise is electoral reform, and she's very excited about the work that we're doing. We started talking about this last election and how well minorities did in comparison to past elections.

We have about 46 people, mostly belonging to the Liberal Party, who are of a minority or aboriginal background. It has been quite exciting for a lot of small communities to see that representation in Parliament. I know we can do better. We want to do better.

Do you feel that bringing some kind of electoral reform to our system would create the change that we would like to see?

Prof. Charles Smith: Thank you for that question. I guess the short answer is yes and no.

I've been following the testimony of some of my colleagues and I was particularly interested in that of Professor Thomas from the University of Calgary on women in Parliament. She studies this aspect directly, so I would defer to some of her testimony, but I do know that when you look at the comparative evidence....

New Zealand is a country that I've studied a little bit, and I follow it. They had set aside three seats, I think, for the Maori, and these were reflected in the permanent seats. After the transition to MMP voting, after a few elections under proportional representation, there was a massive increase in Maori representation in all of the parties. They responded, I think, based on what voters were looking for.

I think there's a real possibility. To the credit of the Liberal Party, the New Democratic Party, the Conservative Party, and the Green Party, they have been actively recruiting a diverse array of candidates, much more so than in the past, but I would defer to your point in asking whether we can do better.

When we put the parties at the centre of that question, I think we're missing a real opportunity to empower voters to make the decisions as well. When we look at the comparative evidence, it's pretty convincing.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Okay.

I looked a bit into Australia because we've been pointing out Australia's great electoral system. They have only three openly gay members of Parliament. About 30% of their parliament are women, which is a bit better than what we're doing, so we've been looking at that number. About three members of the indigenous population are in the House of Representatives. My numbers may not reflect the latest election, but in 2010 or something like that, I saw online that about 28 members had been born outside Australia. Only 10 of those were born outside of Europe, so there were still Caucasian members of Parliament that they were including in that number of 28. Here in Canada we have 46.

Percentage-wise they have fewer members, but we're sitting at almost the same number for women and almost the same number for minorities, so why aren't they doing very much better than us? I want to see the results with these other countries.

We've been talking a lot about party will as well. It's great to have PR systems, but if the will isn't there, then it may be that none of those list members will be women or from indigenous minorities.

When it comes down to it, can we see the results just because of the system they put in place? I'm not seeing it when I look up this information. When it comes to visible minorities, I'm not seeing a big change in the numbers. We're doing much better in Canada.

● (1505)

Prof. Charles Smith: Yes, there's definitely some evidence that Canada is doing well in certain areas.

When we look at where people of colour and indigenous members are being elected, they usually have strong demographic populations in those ridings, which is great and leads to some important observations about the differences in the systems.

Don't forget that Australia only has partial proportional representation. It also deals with the same types of institutions that we have, and it has mandatory voting and what have you. I'm not an expert on Australia, so I can't get into those specifics, but let's look at the—

Ms. Ruby Sahota: What about any other country?

The Chair: Actually, you can talk about any other country for 20 seconds.

Prof. Charles Smith: I would end, then, by pointing to Saskatchewan as an example. Where are the voices of francophones, the francophone Saskatchewan population, or indigenous populations in urban centres who don't have the chiefs speaking for them on the national level the way they do on reserves? These are real questions on which we can ask ourselves if we can do better.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You've raised a great point. I'll come back to it at my next question.

The Chair: Thanks. I appreciate your indulgence, Ms. Sahota.

We'll go to Mr. Maguire for five minutes. Thank you for joining us today. You're the next on the list, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Okay, but I think Mr. Rayes was going to go next.

The Chair: Okay, then we'll switch it around if everyone is in agreement.

Go ahead, Mr. Rayes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Boda and Mr. Smith, thank you for being here today. I join my colleague in thanking everyone here today to attend this meeting of this important committee.

Mr. Boda, my first question is for you.

I will certainly seek your opinion, too, Mr. Smith.

You said in your intervention that election administrators were all concerned about access for all eligible voters. You said that these administrators must make sure that the provisions on the integrity of the vote are effective and free from any consequences that would deprive voters of their right to vote. You said that these provisions must facilitate the vote, not hinder it, and that adopting an electoral system that would encourage the participation of voters could well be one of the best options for reversing this long decline in voter turnout.

Could you please tell us a little more about these issues. When we take a look at the global trend, we see that regardless the voting system, the number of people who vote is declining in almost every country worldwide right now. I find it very surprising that a correlation is being established between the voting system and a possible increase in the number of voters who vote. Furthermore, 70% of Canadians voted in Canada's last election. You also state that we should start to be concerned if the voter turnout rate drops below 50%.

Do you think changing the voting system will increase voter turnout in the medium and long-term?

● (1510)

Mr. Michael Boda: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

I am fundamentally concerned about the direction that turnout is going in western democracies and here in Canada.

In our last general election here in Saskatchewan, we did something that was a bit different. A document I'll be releasing to the Legislative Assembly in the next couple of months describes how we, instead of measuring the number of registered voters, changed to assessing turnout vis-à-vis the number of eligible voters.

Traditionally, when we measured it against registered voters, our turnout numbers were in the range of 65%; in this particular context, when we looked at it in the context of eligible voters, it went down in 2016 to 53.5% of eligible voters, but in 2011 it was 51.1%, so we actually saw an increase in turnout for this election vis-à-vis eligible voters.

However, to me—and the people of Saskatchewan will hear more about this in the fall—it is of fundamental concern, because so many voters have essentially checked out and are not part of the process.

Your question had to do with whether a change in the system would, in the short term or in the long run, increase voter turnout. I guess my response would be that I don't know. I can't answer that question, other than to say there are very many variables, many elements, in an election system—which is inclusive of an electoral system—that have an impact on voter turnout. I can't say that a change in the electoral system will have the impact of increasing the number of voters who turn out. What I would say is that it's one of those variables, and there are certainly unintended consequences to implementing new electoral systems as you move forward, so you don't know what might happen.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Smith, would you like to add anything?

[*English*]

Prof. Charles Smith: Well, here is a question I would respond with. What is the incentive to vote if you're a Conservative in downtown Toronto or if you're a New Democrat in rural Saskatchewan? What's the motivation? If you're a Green Party supporter anywhere except for southern Vancouver Island, what's the incentive? You know, based on past evidence, that there is almost no chance that your vote is going to count. You are going to lose, so if you're a voter in those ridings, then you're not empowered to vote.

Now, maybe you will, because you're committed to the democratic process, or maybe you won't because there is just no point, but your vote isn't going to have the same weight that it would if you were a Conservative in rural Saskatchewan or a Liberal in downtown Toronto or a New Democrat in the western part of British Columbia.

I can't say for certain that electoral reform will change voter turnout, but I don't know if the current barriers are something we can address through electoral reform.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Aldag.

Mr. John Aldag (Cloverdale—Langley City, Lib.): Thank you.

I want to start by saying how delighted I am to be in Regina and Saskatchewan, in the province in which I was born and raised. I look forward to the open mike session this afternoon and to hearing many residents of the province with their thoughts on electoral reform.

I want to jump back to where Professor Smith left off with my colleague Ms. Sahota. You were cut off by our ruthless moderator as you were talking about the absence of francophone representation and urban indigenous representation in Saskatchewan.

I'm curious about your thoughts. Would a change in the system in Saskatchewan and a change in the system nationally address those concerns? I think that's where we were getting to when you ran out of time.

Prof. Charles Smith: I think it provides an opening. If the voting system is to empower voters and citizens, then the question is, can we do better? The data points out that most Canadians see the federal government and the provincial governments as the sites of political power in the country. I think there's an agnostic feeling, or at least a lot of people are feeling quite alienated from their governments, and those are some of the explanations for falling voter turnout rates.

My argument is that if we can empower people to have a voice in Ottawa, in Regina, or even at the local level, then we are opening up a lot of space for voices that are currently not at the table. In the five points of priority for your committee, I think that should be at the centre of the question—can we do better at getting more voices to the table on our political process? I would argue that proportional representation provides openings and space that currently don't exist. Will it solve all the problems that we've talked about and provide higher turnout, more gender representation, more minorities, and more people of colour? Maybe or maybe not, but it provides an opening that currently does not exist.

● (1515)

Mr. John Aldag: Thank you.

I'm going to turn to Dr. Boda for a second.

In your presentation, you talked about such things as increasing ballot access for first nations. As I heard you mention that, I wondered what that looks like. In Saskatchewan, if you've looked at this idea of increasing ballot access for first nations to deal with the low participation rates, what does that look like?

Mr. Michael Boda: It is something that we have been looking at very much here in Saskatchewan.

There are 74 first nations in the province. A lot of people aren't aware of that.

Traditionally, in election administration in the province, whether on the provincial or the federal level, our relationship with first nations was a three-month activity. We would go to our chiefs and have a discussion with them about getting a list in time for the election and getting things organized. We would ask permission to work with them in order to achieve a general election in which they would participate.

Now we've taken a different approach at Elections Saskatchewan, which is that we believe we need to have a long-term relationship, an equal and respectful relationship, with our first nations chiefs, so we have reached out to our 74 chiefs in order to work with them on an ongoing basis.

I began as Chief Electoral Officer in 2012. This time around we began to ramp up almost a year before the process. We began to touch base with our chiefs and asked them to appoint individuals who could work with us to get the lists in place and we asked them to work on what it means to have identification for the process. As an election administrator, I don't focus on voter turnout. What I focus on is barriers. For every single voter in the province, I'm concerned about possible barriers; in that community, identification is an issue, so we began to work with them on that.

After the last general election, our next step will be to maintain relationships across the province with the 74 chiefs so that come the next general election, they will be aware of what is required to be able to vote.

It's about an ongoing relationship of respect with first nations chiefs and their people, and that's what we're doing.

Mr. John Aldag: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Benson, thank you for joining us today.

Ms. Sheri Benson (Saskatoon West, NDP): Thank you very much, Chair, and my thanks to the presenters today.

I'm very proud to be here. I had to go a really long way to get here. I had to zip down from Saskatoon to be in Regina, and I love Regina, even though we sometimes have a sort of battle between our two cities.

Mr. Boda, I'm interested in the comments you made about looking at the number of eligible voters who aren't registered, as opposed to just looking at voter turnout. We're always looking for a way to gauge how well we're doing with respect to the percentage of people who are voting. Could you talk a little bit about your response as an electoral officer when you start to see voter turnout going lower and you start to have concerns about the legitimacy of democracy? As an electoral officer, what do you work at in order to look at that problem? You're looking at it in a particular way. It's different from changing the voting system, and I understand that. What were the pieces that triggered the need to make some changes?

● (1520)

Mr. Michael Boda: I'll go back to my previous comment about barriers and getting the vote out. Often there is the thought that election administrators are responsible for voter turnout, and I'm not of that view. I believe that Elections Saskatchewan and Elections Canada are actors among many actors who are responsible for voter turnout in the country.

Those of you sitting around the table—you and your political parties—are major stakeholders in terms of voter turnout. Third party not-for-profits, civic organizations, and our educational system are stakeholders.

I view Elections Saskatchewan as being part of that process. Where we are perhaps unique, and have a comparative advantage, is in looking at barriers to voting. To answer your question, that is where my focus is. It has to do with looking at what the barrier is to all of our voters, whether that voter is at the University of Saskatchewan or the University of Regina, whether they're in a particular area where there is a lot of mobility and people have been moving in and moving out and are not on our permanent register, and whether that has to do with our 74 first nations, where there is clearly a lot of mobility. We will do a targeted enumeration in that context.

My focus is on the barriers and how we can diminish those barriers going forward.

Ms. Sheri Benson: That's great.

Professor Smith, who is responsible for voter turnout?

I want to give you an example. We talk a lot about public education and those kinds of things. We talk a lot about that. I don't think we do those kinds of things very well. During the last election, I did a lot of voter education on the doorstep.

We can't look at the system now and somehow think that people understand how it's working and therefore it's working. There are barriers to voting. We have issues around helping people become engaged with voting and with helping them to understand the system.

Who is responsible for voter turnout? Do we just leave it to Fair Vote Canada and the local community association? Someone needs to be responsible, if voters are at the centre of a system.

Prof. Charles Smith: The bigger question that we need to answer is why people aren't voting, why 30% don't show up at the polls, depending on the election.

We can't measure it election by election. We need to look at it over time. Pollsters and some quantitative researchers have put forward the idea that people don't know the issues or don't feel smart enough or what have you. I am not convinced of that. I think there is actually legitimacy in apathy, that there are actually people who seem apathetic because they don't feel that their views, their history, and their cultures are reflected in the institutions they are seeing in front of them, and that cuts across class, gender, race, etc.

If we recognize that people are apathetic or angry or alienated from the system, then the answer isn't that it's their fault; the answer is that our institutions are not doing a good enough job. We need to understand what barriers our institutions are presenting so that Canadians can participate in their electoral process, because without that I share Mr. Boda's concern that if people are more and more apathetic about our institutional democracy, then at what point does our democracy become illegitimate?

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Maguire, please.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the presenters for being here today and making your points as clearly as you have.

I just want to say that as a neighbour to Saskatchewan in the Brandon—Souris area just to the east of us here, I have probably as many people voting with their support for the Saskatchewan Roughriders as I have for the Blue Bombers.

You made the point, Mr. Boda, that we've looked at many large rural and remote areas. Coming from a rural riding, I want to say there are difficulties in some of those ridings in how people are able to vote. I'd like to get a comment from you from your perspective as a chief electoral officer in regard to how you see that changing under some of the new options that might be available today.

In bigger constituencies, is it easier to have people come out and vote, or is it still a determination of size and cost in relation to running elections?

● (1525)

Mr. Michael Boda: With respect, I'm going to defer and ask Mr. Smith. I don't think I would want to make a comment on comparing them.

Prof. Charles Smith: Could you ask the question again, please? I thought it was directed specifically at him.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Specifically with regard to rural and remote areas, the comment was that it's tougher for people to be able to get to vote, because they don't have the same access.

Do you see that changing with bigger areas and even larger regions, or will it be the present system with another system on top of it? Where does cost come into it? I think the big thing is accessibility for the voters and getting them all out to vote. Do you see that changing under other systems?

Prof. Charles Smith: Is your concern that if we moved to a form of proportional representation, rural ridings would become so large that it would become almost impossible for voters to access the polls or to know who their representatives are? Is that the question?

Mr. Larry Maguire: That's some of it, yes. I'm just saying that was a comment that was made.

Prof. Charles Smith: Across different countries that use different systems, these are issues. Certainly there are issues that need to be thought through. Not all forms of electoral systems would suggest that we have to move to super-ridings in the rural areas. Fair Vote Canada has put forward an interesting proposal based on the idea of rural-urban PR, whereby urban areas would have proportional representation while rural ones, basically SMPs, would stay the same. If this committee were to find legitimacy in that approach, the size of rural ridings wouldn't change at all.

What I do note, though, is that when we look at how populations are changing in Canada, we see an urbanization of the country. That's been going on for 80 years. The result is that we see increasing sizes of rural ridings. They're getting bigger and bigger because people are moving to the cities in large numbers. We see that there is already a concern about very large geographic ridings in the rural areas, and that's going to continue even if you stay with the status quo.

That's where I think Mr. Boda's ideas around electronic voting or what have you become more important to think through.

Mr. Michael Boda: From an operational standpoint, you asked about costs related to different electoral systems. There are a lot of unknowns related to changing an electoral system, so I can't comment on the cost of changing the electoral system, but ultimately I wouldn't be of the view that one electoral system would cost a great deal more to operate than another one would.

The Chair: Go ahead. You have another minute.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thanks very much.

Earlier you mentioned what you're doing in Saskatchewan, Mr. Boda, with regard to the system. You said that these changes do not happen quickly and you talked about looking at giving some options for change in 2022. Can you elaborate on what would be involved in the education part of that process? You talked about determining the size of the constituencies and that sort of thing. That's just one of the minor details of making the changes. Can you elaborate on some of the other areas?

Mr. Michael Boda: Sure.

I mentioned 2022 because that is when our next boundary delimitation is scheduled. In essence, what we do is build a system based on the boundary delimitation and then work backwards from there. When that event occurs and the boundaries for constituencies change, we begin a process of looking at polling divisions, and then we begin a process of establishing where the polling places are. This is Election Administration 101.

At the same time, we're not currently looking at electoral system change in Saskatchewan, but we are looking at modernization in terms of how we conduct the election. There are a lot of ideas out there.

Basically, we're looking at 2022 for the very reason that it's where the boundary delimitation begins, and then we work backwards from there.

● (1530)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mrs. Romanado to end the round.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.): Thank you.

My apologies if my voice is cracking. Electoral reform doesn't wait for a cold.

We heard from other witnesses that there is no perfect system that will address all of these boo-boos that we have in our current electoral system. Mr. Boda, you mentioned that as an administrator, your focus is on the experience of the voter—that it be positive, efficient, and so on. Given that perspective, could you elaborate on how we could be doing things a little differently?

You mentioned modernization for Saskatchewan's way of voting. Is there some low-hanging fruit that you could recommend to us that could address some of the issues we're facing, whether it be increasing youth participation, increasing women, indigenous, and minority groups in politics, or just increasing voter engagement in general?

Could you elaborate a little bit on some suggestions for us that don't actually change the voting system, if you know what I mean?

Mr. Michael Boda: You're asking for suggestions that don't change the electoral system?

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Exactly. If we were to put that aside, is there something we could be doing to address some of the issues we have?

Mr. Michael Boda: Yes, and I think your question is a question that's being asked across the country. My chief electoral officer colleagues, including Marc Mayrand, are looking at this very issue carefully. How can we improve the voter experience?

You did see, during the last election, that there were questions of lineups. During the federal election there were initially lineups for advance voting in Saskatchewan. We reacted very quickly. The point is that our society is changing, and our needs are changing, and voters' wants are changing. They want to vote in advance more than they ever did before.

Some things we're looking at include looking at the election system—that is, not the electoral system, but how we run the balloting process. There's a lot of discussion right now about what is sometimes called the New Brunswick model or the teller model. It's been used in Australia and in the United States and elsewhere for many years. It makes the voters' experience more efficient for them, in that they're not tied specifically to a ballot box. They come in and we ensure that they're registered, and then it's more like a bank teller model, in the sense that they can go where there's an opening. It speeds the efficiency of the voting process.

There are those things. That's not even around the edges; that's a major improvement in the process. I know many of us are looking at how we could make those recommendations in order to improve the experience at the polls.

There are some other things. We talked about online voting, and there is also the idea of electronic voting. The question is, while balancing those two things of integrity and accessibility, how can you move forward into the 21st century and introduce technology into the process for those who don't have accessibility in order to test some of the technology? I would encourage that very much. How can you use mail ballots? Mail-in ballots are becoming popular in the United States, as many of you will know. Is that an option?

I think there's an opportunity for innovation, but again, going back to “too much, too quickly”, we have to think in terms of two and three electoral cycles instead of just doing it all at once. The Scotland experience has demonstrated for me quite clearly that it proves problematic when you make too many changes too quickly.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Okay.

Professor Smith, do you have any comments?

Prof. Charles Smith: This is a little bit different from the research. In my own personal work in the classroom, one of the things I am experiencing as a professor and educator is that my students are learning differently. My whole job is changing before my eyes. Students are far more interested in online resources. The lecture-based model, research tells us, is not working nearly as well as it did in the past when all of you went to university.

I'm not saying that because I don't know what I'm going to be teaching on Monday. I think our institutions are facing similar pressures. When we look at a demographic model, it's not just young people who are not showing up; it's people who are marginalized, who are on the margins. Looking at the whole system and at why people are not showing up is really important. I don't think online voting is going to solve the problem of youth voter turnout. I'm convinced it won't, because I don't think it speaks to why people are not showing up.

We need to understand that question before we can talk about reforms to the system. Accessibility and the things that Dr. Boda is talking about make perfect sense, but I don't think they're going to solve the problem we are speaking about.

● (1535)

The Chair: Thank you for that very interesting session and the challenges and the ideas you threw out for members to get hold of and discuss. We really appreciate the fact that you were able to make it today, and we hope you'll be following the work of our committee all through this process until December 1.

We thank you for being here.

We're going to suspend for a couple of minutes before the next witness comes in, and then we'll take it from there.

Yes, Ms. May?

Ms. Elizabeth May: Just for the interest of people who might be waiting, we are obviously running late. Shall we assume that the open mike session will be pushed back by half an hour? I'm wondering if we can give any guidance to people who are waiting.

The Chair: I think at 20 to 25 minutes, it's going to be manageable. Thank you.

● (1535)

(Pause)

● (1545)

The Chair: Colleagues, could you take your seats?

We have an additional witness with one more round of questions, and then we go to the open mike session, which I know so many people have been waiting for.

We have with us Darla Deguire from the Canadian Labour Congress. Thank you for being here. Thank you for joining us today for this 24th meeting of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform.

Without further ado, we'll give the floor to you, Ms. Deguire. You have 10 minutes. After that, there will be a round of questions and answers in which each member will be allotted five minutes for both questions and answers.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Chair, are we expecting Ms. Culbertson?

The Chair: No, unfortunately, there's been a change, and Ms. Culbertson cannot be here this afternoon. Sorry; I should have mentioned that at the outset.

Okay, Ms. Deguire, the floor is yours. Thank you.

Ms. Darla Deguire (Director, Prairie Region, Canadian Labour Congress): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know you are running a little bit behind, and I hope to be succinct in my comments.

I want first of all to thank the committee for inviting me to speak here today. I want to preface my comments by saying this is the first time I've ever presented in front of a formal parliamentary panel like this, so I'm a little bit nervous, as you can appreciate. I've conversed from time to time with a few people I know around the table, who assure me I can relax and I don't have to be so nervous. Hopefully I'll help you get back a little bit of your time, since there's only one of me and the other speaker wasn't able to be here. With that, I'll get right into my formal remarks and then pass it back to you for whatever questions might follow.

My name's Darla Deguire. I'm the regional director for the Canadian Labour Congress Prairie Region, which encompasses Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut. I would like to commend the government and the committee on this consultation process and I thank you for allowing me to present today.

Examining how Canadians elect our politicians is a process that is long overdue. On behalf of the Canadian Labour Congress and our 3.5 million members, I'd like to state for the record that our current system of first past the post is outdated and fails to accurately reflect the voting intention or political desires of Canadians as a whole.

In the 2015 elections alone, nine million votes did not count towards electing a member of Parliament who would express those voters' political opinion. Far too often a party is able to achieve a majority government without even getting 40% of the vote. We have seen these false majorities in the last two general elections. In fact, we haven't had a legitimate majority in the last 30 years, and have had only four since the end of the Second World War.

Our current system can generate regional tensions in Parliament and push voters to vote against what they don't want instead of voting for what they do want. Electing a Parliament that reflects the diversity of our country has proven to be difficult.

In order to build a fairer system, electoral reform must be based on three principles: number one, no party should be able to win a majority of seats in the House of Commons without winning a majority of the votes; number two, any reform should ensure that the number of seats a party receives is proportionate to its share of the popular vote; number three, reform should also take into account the importance of local representation.

These principles can be reflected in several models of proportional representation. Throughout my remarks, I might also be saying PR, by which I'll obviously be referring to proportional representation.

With proportional representation, Canada will have a fair system that eliminates wasted votes and more accurately converts votes into seats in Parliament. In addition to allowing for a fairer and more democratic system, PR often provides other benefits as well.

● (1550)

Countries that have adopted PR have seen increases in electing women and under-represented groups as well as an overall increase in voter turnout, as high as 5% to 7%. Additionally, adopting a system of proportional representation can help address alienation and dissatisfaction, because people feel that their votes count. It can also improve attitudes toward the voting system and governance as a whole.

PR gives voters more power to set the government's agenda. It encourages people to vote for what they want instead of voting for who they think can win.

Furthermore, OECD statistics show that governments with PR are more fiscally responsible. Accountability is shared across party lines, and the risks of mismanagement are more costly. A party that loses support is guaranteed to lose seats and, as a result, political clout. This builds more transparency in governance as well.

While any form of PR would be welcomed, we think MMP, or mixed member proportionality, is the simplest way for Canada to move forward with new rules that we can trust. Canadians would still get to vote for their local representative and at the same would have a more fairly balanced representation in the House of Commons. With MMP, people would use a new ballot that asks them to make two choices: first they would vote for a local member of Parliament, just as they do today, and next they would be asked to vote for the political party that they want to represent them.

The first vote gets used to elect the local representative, of course. The second vote is used to balance each party's number of seats in the House of Commons, and, if necessary, to reflect their share of the vote. It is still possible for one party to win a majority government using MMP, but that only happens when one party actually gets the majority of votes. If no one party can do that, then parties must work together to get things done. The added bonus is co-operation among political parties, resulting in a much fairer approach to government that's less about adversarial politics and more about finding common ground in order to produce results and reflect the priorities of Canadians.

Under MMP, we would recommend an open list of names for voters to choose from. We would also suggest to parties that they create their lists in a fashion similar to the nomination process that they currently use in the ridings. We believe the majority of MPs should be elected locally in ridings, but believe the exact proportion should be examined every few years, similar to the way our current ridings are reviewed today. We would also suggest that the lists of MPs should reflect regionality. This would ensure that the lists of MPs have strong ties to the areas they represent.

Changing our electoral system to proportional representation is long overdue. In fact, public support for change is strong. An Abacus Data report earlier this spring asked Canadians about reforming our election rules, and the results were surprising: just 17% said they were comfortable with the first-past-the-post rules that we use today.

That says to me and to the Canadian Labour Congress that the work of this committee is so vital to ensuring the trust of Canadians in our democracy.

Thank you.

● (1555)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Deguire.

As mentioned, we have a spot because Ms. Culbertson was unable to appear. I'm told that there is a group or representative here in the room who officially requested to appear. They're ready to sit down and deliver some remarks. It's the Qu'Appelle Valley Environmental Association. The co-chair, Jim Harding, is here.

Mr. Harding, would you like to come up and say a few words by way of introduction and then answer any questions members may have?

Mr. Jim Harding (As an Individual): What a pleasant surprise.

Welcome to Saskatchewan, not only where medicare started, but where the first human rights legislation was passed in 1945, prior to the UN declaration. I'm just reviving a little of the real Saskatchewan history, which often isn't represented through our voting system.

We are a group that brings forward a reality of voters that shows why a move to proportional representation will be good for the country, including the protection of the environment. Our group is on an interprovincial watershed—Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba—which was deregulated by a majority government that received a minority report under the omnibus bills under the past government.

PR, of course, does add representation that raises major regional issues, not simply local constituency issues. In our opinion, that's a good thing, because there are issues facing Canada that because of the fragmentation at present can't get on to the political agenda of governments and become part of intergovernmental policy and co-operation.

Our group has had people at meetings from 15 local communities in this watershed, one of the watersheds under risk in the province and the country. All of them trying to find a way to get some traction in the governance and policy-making systems. While I won't trace it here, I can show you how protection of a watershed falls between the cracks.

If we move to proportional representation, we know from comparative studies that issues around larger environmental systems and protection, as well as diversity and voter turnout, do change. I think in the comparative research there might be cultural and political like Australia. That is true. However, I think that if you look at the comparative stuff across the board, you're going to find that broad issues of interest that don't get fragmented by party and first-past-the-post self-interests are more likely to get on the agenda.

I would argue that charter issues, environmental sustainability issues, and overcoming regional polarization—which is falsified, in my opinion—have become paramount for the country. That's true across the world too, I would argue.

I guess we are saying to look closely at how a move to a more representative proportional system can strengthen the political culture. We're not talking about gimmicks for getting people out to vote, but lowering the voting age to 16 because you create a culture of involvement. If they're taking civics and they can actually vote and there are discussions and a good curriculum, which was the point of the election returning officer.... Our education is a factor in a democratic culture. Do a whole bunch of things at the same time, not to mix people up but to make the involvement clearer.

At present, we are living under a system that in fact does not respect majority rule. In the last three elections, 23%, 24%, and 27% of eligible voters created the government. The relevant figure is “eligible voters”, not those who voted. The ideal of full involvement in democracy is the ideal that your committee and all of us who are trying to strengthen democracy should work for.

The charter, which in my opinion is a strong basis for moving to PR, says that freedom of expression is at the heart of democratic societies. That's well known in democratic theory and human rights theory. If we can't vote by conscience for what we want and we either get disinterested or vote strategically, we're a step removed from freedom of expression.

● (1600)

The equality principle in the charter seems to me to be clear: one person, one vote; one person, one vote that counts. It seems to me the environmental imperative and the charter are both strong principles that move us away from the first-past-the-post system.

There are lots of examples of how environmental and human rights will become more central to governance, to voter turnout, to our political culture. The regional polarization in Canada is particularly serious. I come from a riding where our MP didn't even tell us that this committee was meeting. We found out about your hearings after you had already filled up your witness list, so I'm particularly pleased and grateful that we got in.

In Saskatchewan, if you're in rural Saskatchewan and you're of the 50% who didn't vote for the MP, there are huge barriers to accessing the political culture. Take first nations, for example. There weren't even voting booths in first nations communities in our constituency until the last election, when we had a candidate who insisted on it. It makes a huge difference if first nations don't have to drive to a rural poll. Voting is part of being in a community. That's another critique about online voting, by the way; it's not just the security issue. We vote as social beings, as part of a community that cares about things—local things for sure, regional things for sure, and water. That's why we vote. However, if the voting system is rigged or biased so that those interests can't somehow create a coalition of involvement, they will be invisible in the outcome, in terms of the election.

Those are our main points. We'll finalize our brief after we get more information; we're coming here as part of the learning process. Right now we have 13 points in our brief. We take positions on pretty much all of the things.... It has come out of a process of trying to see what happens when a group that's starting to form regionally around protecting the watershed starts to look at the system of voting, at what happens in terms of governments and the agendas that governments work with.

My guess is that there's not co-operation among Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba MPs—right now, on an all-party basis—to protect our watershed. I would think that would be worth checking. There should be. If a Conservative and an NDP and a Liberal are working to do that, that's fine with us. The political culture should be encouraging that co-operation. We think moving to PR—we're not taking a position on the kind of PR—will help move that political culture along.

Those are the main points. You have a written version, but our final one will come by the October deadline.

● (1605)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll start the round with Mr. DeCourcey, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thank you very much, Ms. Deguire and Mr. Harding, for your comments this afternoon, and for joining us here today.

Ms. Deguire, you made a comment to the effect that you believe PR gives voters more power in their ability to shape the government agenda. One of the comments that we've heard iterated a number of different ways from different presenters over the months is that different voting systems effectively provide different timing and place in the way in which the agenda gets set and how the coalition is effectively built. The first past the post, single-member plurality privileges the agenda-setting going into an election. Voters see what is likely to be a government's agenda in the campaign platform should they be elected with a plurality or majority of seats, as opposed to a PR system, where the coalition is built at a different point, potentially out in the open instead of potentially behind closed doors.

I say that just to preface my question. Can you elaborate a little on how you—the congress and your membership—see an electoral system as providing voters with an ability to shape the government's agenda?

Ms. Darla Deguire: I was speaking more to the point that the current system is broken as it is now. By this I mean that what we've seen is, time and time again, majority governments whose agendas we already know. If we elect a certain government that has campaigned on ripping up labour legislation and going to war with unions, for instance, and there are various other egregious things in their platform and commitments they've made publicly, then we know that when that government gets elected, that's what they're going to do.

What we're saying is that in a PR system, at least we have a hope of different viewpoints and, as you said, more of a coalition of people, more interest around the table to create just not one agenda, if that makes sense. It gives people a reason to say they're not going to just sit on their hands on election day because this party is going to get in power regardless of whether they go to the polls or not to vote, because their votes won't count and it's inevitable that they're going to see a government that is going to do the opposite of what they value and want to see a government do.

That's the short answer.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thank you.

Quickly, does the labour congress have any view or opinion on how, once the committee concludes its process, we validate our recommendation with Canadians by way of referendum or some other citizen-led process, or a vote in Parliament? Is there a point of view on that?

Ms. Darla Deguire: Yes. First of all, this is the start of that process, right? That's why I do mean that I commend this committee for doing the work it's been set out to do. We do believe in this process, and we do put a lot of trust and goodwill into what's being done here. I know this committee is going to come to some pointed conclusions and provide some recommendations going forward. We trust that process, and that's first and foremost.

As it pertains to a something larger, such as a referendum, we don't necessarily have an opinion either way, other than we do believe that you should be consulting with Elections Canada. I think that would be important, because I don't know if a referendum on this particular issue is going to get Canadians out in droves. I don't know if this is the most important, top-of-mind issue for Canadians right now. I don't know if going as far as a referendum would be necessary, but I do encourage.... This process is wonderful. I think local MPs are having some town halls. We continue to encourage that approach of inviting people to come forward to an open-mike portion—

● (1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Sorry about that. It's just the way it is.

We'll go to Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: First of all, I assume that what you presented today is not your own idea but is something being proposed by the Canadian Labour Congress. You're representing the position, and I'm assuming that's the national position. Is that the position of the Saskatchewan chapter or branch or section of the Canadian Labour Congress, or is it the national position?

Ms. Darla Deguire: It's our position nationally, as an organization. We're set up in regions, but we're all one congress.

Mr. Scott Reid: When it comes to this policy, it's one national policy.

Ms. Darla Deguire: That's right.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. Is the detailed version of your policy available on your website?

Ms. Darla Deguire: It hasn't been submitted yet, as far as I know, but I know we will have a much more extensive position paper, a brief, that will be provided to the committee.

Mr. Scott Reid: So it will be submitted to us or to our clerk?

Ms. Darla Deguire: Yes. I believe there are some other committee hearings coming up in Ottawa, maybe at the end of this process, at which you will be consulting more experts, and you'll also hear from some of our more expert staff on this issue during that time as well.

Mr. Scott Reid: All right.

You mentioned that within the MMP model it should be an open list system. That would be as opposed to a closed list system, of course, and I think that is salutary. Then you said that each party ought to nominate people for their their lists by using the same model that a party uses for candidate nominations in ridings. Did I understand that correctly?

Ms. Darla Deguire: Yes. It's a suggestion. That could be one way of doing it. We are not hell-bent on any exact model of PR. It's just a suggestion that this could be one way of doing it. You're correct.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. It's not a bad idea, as far as I can see. There's only one difficulty that occurs to me off the top of my head when we're trying to do this, and I will use my own party as an example.

I was nominated using a preferential ballot, but only one person was going to win the nomination from my party and my riding. Presumably a list in the province would have multiple winners. In Saskatchewan, if you had a compensating list for half the seats, for example, you'd be talking about—I can't remember the number of seats. It's 14, is it? With 14 seats, you'd have seven people on that list. By necessity, it would have to be a slightly different system. I'll just draw your attention to that.

On the whole, I thought that was interesting.

You know what? That was all I had to ask. Thank you very much.

Voices: Oh, oh!

● (1615)

The Chair: Okay. We'll go to Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thank you very much.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here.

In terms of the mandate, the so-called false majorities, the last majority we had in this country, I believe, was under Mr. Mulroney, and then you have to go back to find a government that actually got more than 50% of the support. Is your suggestion, then, that a government coming in with less than 50% of the vote, yet with 50% of the power, has what we'd call a weak mandate? Is it your suggestion that the mandate was technically a majority, but it wasn't expressed as a majority from Canadians?

Ms. Darla Deguire: I'll go back to my comment, which is that in order to get a majority government, you should have the majority of the vote.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Right, and that's when the term "false majorities" comes up. We've only had four true ones after World War I. It's interesting because if that's a false majority for a government, about two-thirds of the MPs in the House of Commons right now didn't get 50% of the vote in their ridings, and some received less than 30% of the support.

I think it was Ms. Sahota, in an earlier panel, who brought up the example of Australia not having a good representation of minority groups in particular, which is true, and it is an interesting condemnation of the alternative vote that Australia uses, which gives these further false majorities and doesn't do much for diversity in representation.

I want to make a distinction between.... The commitment we're operating under, the one the Prime Minister made, the one that set p this committee, is for electoral reform, and to make the last election the last one under first past the post. Is that your understanding as well?

Ms. Darla Deguire: Yes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Whether we talk about online voting, mandatory voting, or voting age, none of those issues actually changes first past the post. I just held a number of town halls, and people were asking us to distinguish among those things. They're valid topics and interesting conversations, but first past the post is the order of the day. That is what fulfills the commitment: ending that system.

I'm wondering about this from a labour perspective.

You represent 3.5 million Canadians. I have a question and then a request. The request I'll start with is in terms of education. We keep saying it. You have 3.5 million Canadians under the labour congress. You have a broad reach to educate those working people about what's going on. I would hope that would be something.... I know that the Canadian Labour Congress announced something last week.

My question is this: why is this important to working people? Usually it's about equity of pay, equal work for equal pay for men and women, labour standards, or health and safety in the workplace. Those are things that I naturally understand the labour community being interested in. Why this issue?

Ms. Darla Deguire: That's a rhetorical question, Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: No, no, it's not. No, it's a concern.

Ms. Darla Deguire: It's for exactly all of those reasons.

First of all, I don't think it's any secret here that the CLC is a political organization. That is what we do. We do politics and we try hard to engage our membership in the electoral process and to care about issues that are important to working people. With that, it makes sense to us that a really important part of getting people involved and engaged is having them care about something, and we want them to care about issues because they see the importance and the connection and the link between these issues and engaging in the political process.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I have a quick question about equity, then.

Canada right now ranks, I believe, 64th in the world in terms of women in Parliament. Even with the dramatic swing we saw from the last Parliament to this one, the representation of women in Parliament went up only 1%. It wasn't a dramatic swing at all. It's still hovering at far less than a third.

We've heard testimony that proportional systems will allow better access for women in particular to get elected, and for other groups that are under-represented. Is this a part of CLC's mandate? Is this something that you're concerned with at all? Does it inform your brief to us today?

Ms. Darla Deguire: I think I do actually mention that in my comments. I mention the fact that other countries have seen slight increases in women and under-represented groups being elected. We can't say for certain, but I think there's a bigger problem and conversation we have to have at a different table. I can't wait for another committee to be established to talk about how we raise the proportionality of all sorts of folks who are not represented in the House of Commons right now, but all we can say is that the system right now is not reflective of the Canadian landscape.

● (1620)

The Chair: Thank you. We'll have to go on.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ste-Marie, you have the floor.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to welcome the witnesses.

I will give you a moment to put your earpieces in so you can hear the simultaneous interpretation.

Thank you for—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Wait a minute.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Mr. Chair, will the countdown of my time be stopped, since Mr. Cullen told me to wait before starting my intervention?

The Chair: Don't worry, Mr. Ste-Marie.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: You say that, but I'm still a little skeptical.

The Chair: You have my word on it.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Very well.

I was pleased to watch your presentations.

Mr. Harding, thank you for speaking. What you told us was very interesting. I am the member for the Quebec riding of Joliette, and the protection of water is a very important issue for us there, too. In this case, I wish you the best of luck in things.

I will start with a brief comment for Ms. Deguire.

At the start of your presentation, you said that the current system was causing regional tensions. I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. Canada is a federation made up of several nations. In Quebec, for example, we have our own cultural references, we don't consume the same media, and we don't have the same discussions. So it's normal that we won't always vote the same way.

In the last election, we voted for the party that currently forms the government. In the previous election, it was my colleagues' party that won by creating a huge wave. The reason for that was that the issues it was putting forward resonated with Quebecers at the time. The same thing happened in the Prairies, in Saskatchewan, when the Canadian Alliance swept the province. It reflected the concerns of the citizens at the time.

You both spoke about the need to put in place a reform that would rely more on proportional representation. I appreciate that. Your arguments touch me, and you have convinced me completely. Unfortunately, I don't think the current government will go for this approach. When it said it wanted to change the voting system, it was the second opposition party. Now, in the current system, it has a majority government.

I say this because we saw the same thing in Quebec. Both the Parti Québécois and the Liberal Party said that they would carry out electoral reform based on proportionality. But once they were in power, and had been well served by the current system, they did not.

Should there not be proportionality-based reform, what other measures that fit with your aspirations and values could be adopted as part of this reform?

For example, would it be interesting for the current government to put in place a preferential voting system?

Ms. Deguire, you have already partially answered my question by answering Mr. Cullen.

Alternatively, should we establish a system for publicly financing political parties where, because of this financial support, each vote would count for more?

For example, should seats be set aside for first nations in each province?

Starting with Ms. Deguire, I'd like to know what you'd be interested in if reform did not take the direction of a proportional system.

[*English*]

Ms. Darla Deguire: Thank you.

To be honest, we don't have another position. We maintain that position, and that's the position we're going to continue to press forward with. I'm sorry for the short answer, but proportional representation is what we'd be looking for.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: The answer was short but clear.

Mr. Harding, what do you think?

[*English*]

Mr. Jim Harding: I think it's fair to say that while we've developed positions on the other issues, it's not our view that tinkering with the first-past-the-post system is going to make the change that's required. We have looked at the ranking system, and I realize that if you projected the last election using the ranking system and took the polling results on second votes, you would have ended up with an even more disproportionate Parliament than under first past the post. People might not vote on a rank in the same way—I understand that—but there are some real risks and difficulties with that system in getting from where we are now to more proportionality.

I think it's fair to say that we think that's the core change, a move to PR, though we have not taken a position on the way it has developed, because Canada might be able to develop a unique combination to deal with the particular issues.

● (1625)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ste-Marie. Your time is up, unfortunately.

Now we'll move on to Ms. May, who might continue along those same lines.

[*English*]

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to start with Professor Harding. I also want to thank the Canadian Labour Congress for a clear position, one I'm grateful to hear.

I want to ask Professor Harding a few questions, and I want to start with full disclosure.

Jim, I've been trying to remember how long we've known each other. I think you were a full professor at the University of Regina when I first met you. We didn't get a chance to get your bio, because you slid in here when we had a cancellation, so thank you. I think we may have been working together on uranium mining as long ago as the late 1970s. Does that sound right to you? We both look so young that it can't be true.

Is that about right? Was it in the early 1980s or late 1970s?

Mr. Jim Harding: It was in the late 1970s. I'm in my late 70s.

Ms. Elizabeth May: What a coincidence.

What I wanted to pursue, because we haven't had a lot of presentations from environmentalists before our committee, was one of the things that surprised me about Professor Lijphart's research in a book called *Patterns of Democracy*.

Just to give you a quick precis, he studied 36 democracies and looked to see if there were any patterns between those that he clustered as majoritarian oppositional voting—the first past the post and alternative vote—versus consensus-based voting, as he describes proportional representation, and I wasn't surprised that there were patterns of higher voter turnout, more women in Parliament, and a more civil discourse, with people trying to find middle ground.

However, I was surprised by two things: one was that there was a better macroeconomic performance, and the other was that there was stronger environmental protection. That was an empirical finding. I hope I'm not putting you on the spot, because I don't know if you've thought about this, but given your experience—and I think from your evidence off the cuff, you certainly have thought about it—can you think of any reasons that countries that use proportional representation would tend to have a statistically proven increased level of environmental protection over those countries that use first past the post?

Mr. Jim Harding: Well, yes. You can think through the voter as a whole person voting from their full set of concerns versus our having to compromise what we do with the vote when we decide whether we're even going to vote, or how we vote. I think a quarter of us still voted strategically in the last election; I did, and right off the bat, we've compromised our whole-person awareness, and our whole-person awareness is a way of looking at the charter.

I'm a retired professor. I was a professor of psychology as well as environmental studies at Waterloo, and professor of justice studies at the University of Regina, just so you know. At Regina, our justice program looked at political justice, environmental justice, criminal justice, legal justice, and social justice because we felt that in liberal arts education, justice is a key concept in human civilization. So is beauty, including environmental beauty, which we seem to be losing a sense of—at least, in our community, we are.

We wanted to build the liberal arts comparative education around justice in all spheres, and it seems to me that you have that mandate now, in Canada, on behalf of us. That is your mandate, because justice is at the centre of your principles of electoral reform. Why wouldn't we have more chance of bringing our concerns about our children and our grandchildren and climate change and water degradation—which is really serious in this province—into the political culture if we could talk to each other cross-party, honestly, and not compromise our chance of getting re-elected?

Think about that. Local representation under the first past the post actually forces us to compromise, to appease special interests that are part of our voting bloc, which is totally different from listening to the whole electorate and their concerns, including the ones who voted for other parties.

● (1630)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jim Harding: There is your answer. It's just a simple, logical result of—

Sorry; I think you cut me off.

The Chair: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I brought the mike back on afterward because it was so interesting.

Ms. Sahota is next.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Going back to my point about Australia, I do note that they use an AV system. I'm just trying to get to the point where we can have better representation, and the Senate there, which uses an STV system, is a bit better, but it's still not quite there on minorities either, so I'm trying to figure out how we can do better.

Anyway, Ms. Deguire, you commented in your introduction about what voters want, and that is one of the things we're trying to figure out in this committee. What do voters want? What are the values they are interested in? At the end of the day, what kind of representation are they looking for? Is it local? Is it national? It's all of those things.

You represent 3.3 million Canadian workers. I know that you're a huge organization in this country and I know you seem to have done some surveys. How were those surveys conducted? Did all 3.3 million of your members take part in that survey on electoral reform, and have they come to the conclusion that MMP is what they're looking for?

Ms. Darla Deguire: Yes, well, first of all, we wish—we totally wish—that we had engaged 3.3 million workers, that's for sure, but the fact is no, of course not. It's not the most exciting topic for many. It wasn't the most exciting topic for me either, until I started getting educated on it and started understanding the different systems myself.

That said, as an organization we do a lot of different polling on various political issues all the time, but we started having this conversation more broadly with our membership around election time. The reason we did it was that we had, as you may recall, at least a couple of parties that campaigned on and made promises to Canadians around electoral reform. That really is what brings us here today: to hold our government accountable to the commitment they've made.

Yes, we try as hard as we can to engage our members in all of our issues. Are they all engaged on electoral reform? Probably not, but I think Nathan spoke about how we've launched a campaign just in the last few weeks. You can visit our website, Canadianlabour.ca, where you'll find all sorts of information that we've put together on electoral reform and on why our members should care.

I hope we'll have 3.3 million views in the coming weeks, but till then we'll just carry on as we do with all of our important political issues and try to engage folks as best we can. That's the long and the short of it.

● (1635)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You mentioned that 17% of voters were uncomfortable with voting in the last election, uncomfortable with going to the ballot box or something like that. How did you come up with that number? I'm interested in knowing how that poll was conducted.

Ms. Darla Deguire: I was referring to an Abacus Data report, I believe. That was done this spring. We're happy to share it. We obviously would never cite something that wasn't public and common knowledge. If you're interested in that poll, we could get it for you.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Now that you have started this campaign, I am intrigued to know more. I am sure you don't have much feedback yet, as it is a very new campaign you've started, but what feedback have you been getting from the members you have engaged in the past? How many of your members have been engaged on this topic in the past?

Ms. Darla Deguire: I'm not sure I could put a definitive number on it. I would suggest that this issue has been talked about for a while now at the leadership level.

I'm not sure if you're aware of the structure of the labour movement. We have our national leadership, which makes up what we call our Canadian council, which represents all 54 of our member unions. With many of the issues we take up, the conversation usually starts there. We rely a lot on our member unions to go back into their organizations and support the various campaigns and issues we're talking about, but it's more up to them to engage their membership. We don't actually touch, or reach, or even phone 3.3 million members. We rely on our member unions to help us do that.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Is it the leadership that makes this decision?

Ms. Darla Deguire: Well, I guess it depends on the issue. I'm not sure exactly what the process was with this particular issue.

The Chair: I assume someone takes charge of doing the work. I guess that's the question.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rayes, you have the floor.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Thank you both for being here.

Ms. Deguire, in your presentation, you quoted polls to document what you were saying or your organization's position. You gave one figure of 17%. There are also plenty of other polls on many other topics, including the referendum afterwards.

Why use this poll to support your vision, when according to almost all polls released in Canada, Canadians want to have an opportunity to express their opinion through a referendum? Yet, in your organization's position or in your presentation, you don't take this into account.

[*English*]

Ms. Darla Deguire: For the record, we do not have a position on a referendum. We leave that decision and that process or consultation to take place at whatever the appropriate place is for that to happen, whether it be through this committee or through another government committee. We don't have a formal position on a referendum.

● (1640)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: We had a very good meeting in Ottawa a few weeks ago. Young people from the Institut du Nouveau Monde came to speak to us. It's a Quebec organization that does a lot with young people, in particular. As an aside, they are in favour of changing the voting system.

Looking at the observations they made after asking young people about their lack of interest in voting, we can see that no one necessarily spoke about the voting system or said that they felt under-represented. However, what did emerge was fairly clear.

The main reasons people 18 to 34 years of age did not vote were a lack of interest in politics, quite simply, and being too busy to vote. The third reason for not voting, according to the categories, is the problem of registering, which we are hearing a lot about in the regions. I don't think that changing the voting system will result in more or less. You can change it without changing the voting system. Adding polling stations throughout would be very simple.

We also asked seniors. The Conservative Party didn't conduct this survey, but a completely neutral organization that is in favour of a change so that we have a mixed member proportional system. Seniors gave more personal reasons, such as being outside the riding, having health problems or being disillusioned with politics altogether.

I often ask myself this question. We often come back to changing the voting system. Having said that, I'm not necessarily for or against this change, but I find that perhaps we are asking the wrong questions. Today, I'm not convinced—and I'm trying to let myself be convinced by some—that we will have greater turnout and greater interest by changing the voting system. In almost every democracy around the world, even in countries that have adopted the proportional vote, voter turnout has dropped. In New Zealand, the percentage of voters has dropped from 85% to 75% since they adopted a proportional voting system.

The Chair: We're going to consider that more of a comment than a question since we don't have time for an answer.

We'll continue with Mr. Aldag.

[*English*]

Mr. John Aldag: Thank you.

My colleague Ms. Sahota asked Ms. Deguire about values, and I want to continue with that discussion. Actually, I'd like to hear from both our witnesses.

You've come up with recommendations on solutions that you'd like to see, and I'm curious about the discussions that you had. What are the values that you would like to see reflected in a system, and what led you to that conclusion? To me, it's really important to understand the process you've gone through in order to come to the recommendations that you've made. If you're able to articulate them, what kinds of values would you say need to be reflected in an updated electoral reform system that would be a reflection of your recommendation?

Maybe Ms. Deguire could start, and then we'll flip it over.

Ms. Darla Deguire: As a starting point, why does the labour movement in Canada care about electoral reform? Why would that be something that we would want to engage our membership on and want to put resources into?

I guess it all comes down to fairness. We as an organization—and I would go as far to say including our 53 or so member unions—didn't just start having a conversation about electoral reform when the Liberals were elected or when we heard that this government was committed to having a process and wanted to hear from Canadians and organizations such as ours. We've been having this conversation for a long time, and the conversation started around fairness.

That was really the starting point for us. We want to see a system that is fair to Canadians, so that people can start voting for something, as opposed to voting against something.

We already heard about strategic voting today. When I talked about values, I mentioned that what's really important for us is to ensure that people, when they go to the ballot box, feel that they are voting for a representative and a political party that will represent their issues or their concerns as citizens, as opposed to saying, “I'm going to vote for this person because I don't want that other person to win.”

● (1645)

Mr. John Aldag: That's good. It's about fairness. You've made that point.

Mr. Harding, does your organization have any thoughts? You came to a proportional representation conclusion as well. Was any of the thinking leading up to that related to things like values? How did you reach that conclusion?

Mr. Jim Harding: It's certainly fairness and equality in the sense I described, but it's sustainability and stability as well. We think you will get stability and an ability for governance for the long term with a shift in global awareness about the climate crisis. There is certainly a strong value in our generation in shifting to governments for sustainability. I don't think that can happen with the fragmented four-year appeasement of the voter base that occurs under first past the post.

I've been in politics, and I know. I was a mayor and I was on city council here, and I know what happens after you're elected. It's a real force of fragmenting and shifting and partisanship, and the common interests of the community—the capacity to learn, listen, and co-operate—are interfered with.

That's tough. I've come out of the shock waves of being a mayor and I'm back to being my normal self again. You know what I'm talking about. The values, it seems to me.... We need a different view of stability. You get a different concept of stability for the long term, for seven generations and our grandchildren. My son's a marine biologist. He just had a baby, and he's worried. Those values move to the centre.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Ms. Benson, please.

Ms. Sheri Benson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank both of you for your presentations.

My first question is for Mr. Harding. I assume you are not a professor anymore and not a mayor anymore. Are you, Mr. Harding?

I am just being funny. I really related to some of the things you said. I am a first-time member of Parliament and I came out of the not-for-profit sector. I have worked my whole life trying to be around a table bringing people together in order to find the best solution that includes as many voices as possible.

In terms of changing the electoral system, I come to the conclusion that the current system will not allow us to address some of the issues that are facing us. Certainly, being on the community side, I have done the flip-flop with different governments and have tried to work over a long term on some issues that remain in my community around racism, poverty, and homelessness. A few times people have come to me and said, “I didn't vote for you, but I live in your riding”, so I would say “Well, I am still your member of Parliament.” It is an interesting conversation to have with people. What does that really mean?

I am asking you to continue your comments and perhaps show an example of why the system currently doesn't allow us to tackle some of the issues that need to be tackled in a very different way. Currently, when you sit in the House of Commons across the aisle from a majority government, you feel your inability, and I am not saying this is personal. There is no impetus, no incentive to co-operate, to be consensual. You can feel that there.

● (1650)

Mr. Jim Harding: With the winner-take-all system, the other side of it is the losers are out. Winner take all means the losers are out. The losers are our neighbours and citizens. We know who they are. We know poverty, housing, food security. Come on, folks.

Right now in my community we have an MP, Andrew Scheer, who believes he's secure, and therefore he turns from the interests of the broad community because he doesn't have to address those issues. Now, he went from 56% to 46%, so he's through next time. If PR came, we would have had different representation from rural prairie Saskatchewan. It wouldn't be the blue zone, folks.

Don't ever assume that rural Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta are all still in the aura of Harper. They are not. They never were. The values of co-operation, of neighbourliness, of planning, of responsibility for each other, of including each other in governance, even if we voted differently, are actually still very strong. They just haven't had a chance to come back.

It's funny: I'm rurban. I was born on an experimental farm in Swift Current, where Brad Wall comes from. My parents were part of the first medicare experiment in Swift Current, which led to the provincial system under Tommy Douglas. I used to drive Tommy Douglas as a kid, by the way. I was raised in that ethic.

He drove in cars with PCers and Liberals to rallies because they didn't have enough cars. They argued in the car all the way to the rally, they argued at the rally—and with the Socreds—and then they argued all the way home. They were always engaged and learning what it is that we're trying to do as political public servants.

That ethic is not here anymore, folks.

The Chair: If I understand correctly, what you're saying is that we can achieve consensus under first past the post if we have fewer cars.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Jim Harding: This goes back to the values. Our society is changing, and we can all say we could become more participatory and democratic with the new technology if we get intergenerational respect and work together. We all have that vision, but there are barriers in the system.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Maguire, please.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the presenters again for your views.

Ms. Deguire, I want to check on a couple of things. I have two questions, if I have time. You indicated that you have 3.5 million members in your opening comments and that the first-past-the-post system was outdated, that nine million votes didn't count. Then you indicated that the solution to this is a PR system whereby people would be elected locally by first past the post and there would then be a second vote in which you could vote for the party you wanted as well.

Is it your premise that a lot of people would vote for other than the party of the person they voted for under first past the post? In first past the post, I think everybody knows that each one of us has a political party behind us and that we're a part of it.

Can you elaborate on that?

● (1655)

Ms. Darla Deguire: Yes. It's an interesting question.

We do think there would definitely be maybe not a significant amount, but definitely a small group of people who absolutely would want to decipher between the two, and this system would enable them to do that. I guess it would localize it more.

You'd be voting for your local MP. Even though they are attached to a party, it would be more for your local representative, as it is now, but then there would be a second voting system of voting for a party. Yes, we would maintain that. We think people would perhaps vote differently, as far as I know, as far as we've concluded.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you.

You've indicated that you have a number of members and that you weren't that engaged in this discussion on electoral reform until the Canadian Labour Congress brought it to your attention. Then, of course, you have the process of informing your membership through your union representatives and regional unions to get the message to them. I'm assuming that each one of them has a say, of course, in electing your leaders of the Canadian Labour Congress, and also then would have a say in this electoral reform process. Is that correct?

Ms. Darla Deguire: I guess the short answer is yes.

Mr. Larry Maguire: If they each have an opportunity to vote on significant changes in their area, I think my colleague's question earlier was why you would not be in favour of a referendum for something as important as changing the electoral system. I see it as similar to the contracts that employees sign with their employers.

Ms. Darla Deguire: To be really clear, we don't have a position on a referendum. We just would ask that all avenues be explored in the way we consult with Canadians. It may in fact be by a referendum. At the end of the day, it may be concluded that this is the best way to ask Canadians, but it could be through other means, such as town halls and local gatherings, etc.

We don't have an organizational position on it. We're not opposed to it; it's just not something that we've decided firmly either way. We encourage the process of talking as much as possible to Canadians about the issue, in whatever way it happens.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Maguire.

We'll close the round with Ms. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you so much.

Thank you both for being here this evening.

Professor Harding, your background will speak to this. In one area we're looking at, we've seen across Canada—at least I have, in the town halls that I have done—that there's a lot of misinformation out there, and there's a great lack of education. I don't know whether it's because folks checked out or don't care as much about electoral reform, but there's a lot of misinformation out there, and a great lack of information.

We've asked multiple witnesses about the education component, the civic literacy. I'd like to get your feedback to know what your thoughts are. I know that education is under provincial jurisdiction, but could you give us some thoughts on having groups such as yours or the labour congress and so on go out to talk to folks? How can we make sure that folks are getting the right information, so that when we are having this conversation they're prepared for it and actually know what we're deciding?

Could you elaborate a little?

● (1700)

Mr. Jim Harding: I'd love to. Here I am, which makes me very happy. I've bugged your clerk in Ottawa for the last two weeks on behalf of our group. It looks like advocacy and sticking at it might actually be able to penetrate the system.

In the town hall held by the MP in Regina, there were 300 people. How many people do you see behind me? In the minister's information session, which went very well, there were another 300 people, and these were different people. How many people do you see behind me? You see, you're not hearing the same vibrant thing I did, and I'm trying to bring it to you.

I'm the representative of a learning process, because as an environmental group concerned with watershed protection, our group decided that we had a stake in this. We held meetings and we did self-study. We've been to all three of the gatherings here. There are others here from our group. You see, we've learned an immense amount in the last month because we wanted to get ready for you folks, and most of the population is not going to go through that process.

Also, a referendum is a joke in terms of democratic consent, because if you have four things on there, one pure PR and two kinds of MMP, and then preferential and first past the post, a minority view is going to win the referendum. You all know that.

I was in Thunder Bay in the 1970s when they changed the name. They used to be Port Arthur and Fort William. The business community didn't like the vying between the two groups. There was a history to it; the English were Fort William and the immigrant workers were Port Arthur. I know the history there. On the ballot, they wanted Thunder Bay. On the ballot, there were three choices: Thunder Bay, Lakehead, and The Lakehead. Do you know which one won? Thunder Bay. All kinds of people were referring to the place as "the Lakehead" and had been forever, as in, "we live at the Lakehead". That was our common identity.

Anyway, we're Thunder Bay, and I like it because it's an Indian name, but the vote was rigged, because the majority of people did see the place as the Lakehead. If they had said "Lakehead or the Lakehead", it probably would have received 60% of the vote.

Participation and learning are really crucial, so I don't think a referendum is going to be creating consent. I think you need to have the courage as parliamentarians and as a government to get the process moving. People need to participate in an alternative to be able to evaluate it. I really think that's true.

Things can be reversed, but we need to change in order to bring the momentum of public participation onside, particularly at this period, because you know how far down we've gone. When I was active in the 1960s, when Pearson was the prime minister, we had an 80% voter turnout, and then it was 61% for a minority government for Harper. The Liberals brought it up, but the four million more who voted brought it up only to 69%, which is 10% or 11% below the Pearson period. Our goal should be up at the top.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We're at the end of our round.

I think the operative word for this particular session was "serendipity". It was our good fortune to have you here, Mr. Harding, really in an unexpected manner. We appreciate, of course, your experience with Canada's political history, including going as far back as Tommy Douglas here in Saskatchewan. Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Deguire, for giving us the perspective of the Canadian Labour Congress and speaking so clearly and honestly.

Again, thank you to both witnesses.

We'll now move to the open-mike session. We have two mikes. I'll call people up to mike one and mike two. When mike one is free because the person has intervened, I'll invite a person up to mike one while the person at mike two is speaking.

We have two minutes per speaker at the mikes. It's very important that we respect that time limit. If I have to cut you off, it's not that we're trying to be rude or that you've done something wrong; it's just the dynamics of these kinds of meetings. Please don't take it personally.

We'll start at mike one with Mr. Imhoff and at mike two with Robert Bandurka.

Mr. Imhoff, the floor is yours for two minutes, please.

● (1705)

Mr. Kenneth Imhoff (As an Individual): Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak before you.

I'm president of the Regina—Qu'Appelle NDP federal riding association. This is on the ground, and it's what we're talking about. Our presentation was a product of a consultation within our federal riding executive.

We only have two minutes, although we had also asked to be a witness before the panel, which certainly concerns me, but so be it. We have some critical points to put forward. We believe that a proportional representative system would be certainly an improvement over first past the post.

We are not necessarily in favour of a ranked voting system because I think it would add a whole degree of complexity, and if anything goes wrong, then it's going to undermine public confidence.

A mixed member proportional representative system, we believe, best represents the principle that every vote counts. We've heard the term every vote counts, but from the point of view of our executive it's every vote counts to its maximum potential, and that's the key piece of it. A mixed member proportional system ought to represent, and as close as possible match, the proportion of the vote cast for a given political party in a given province. We believe that under such a system the emphasis must be on the province or the region.

There's a corollary to that, which is important for the Regina—Qu'Appelle riding, and it is that it has to acknowledge a gender balance when we talk about the list for such a mixed member system. It must acknowledge gender balance, first nations, and visible minorities.

This is a particularly sensitive issue for the Regina—Qu'Appelle electorate, because it is composed of 11 reserves. Think of that. We have 11 of the 71. A little over 21% of the population in Regina—Qu'Appelle is first nations, because we are also composed of both urban and rural—

The Chair: In terms of the 11, I missed that point. You were saying you had...?

Mr. Kenneth Imhoff: We have 11 of the 71 first nations.

The Chair: Right, so under proportional representation they'd be better represented is essentially your....

Mr. Kenneth Imhoff: I would suggest to you that they're not really represented in our riding.

The Chair: Got it. Okay.

We're going to have to go to mike number two, Mr. Imhoff.

I'm sorry; you went well over two minutes. We're at 2:44.

Mr. Kenneth Imhoff: I find it very frustrating.

The Chair: I know, but you made your points, and they're good points.

Mr. Bandurka is next, and we'll ask Mr. Kuyek to come to mike number one, please. Is Mr. Kuyek here? Yes.

I will put up my hand at 90 seconds for everybody.

Mr. Robert Bandurka (As an Individual): I don't think I'm going to be watching either.

The Chair: We'll do our best.

Go ahead, Mr. Bandurka.

Mr. Robert Bandurka: I must confess that I am probably going to be the most partisan presenter today. I'm making these comments to the committee because you have both an enviable job and a disheartening one—enviable because of all the good that can happen, but disheartening because it's virtually impossible to be done in 10 or so weeks. It could be done in 10 years, maybe, but not before 2019, which is the next election. Plus, it's exciting. We get to contribute some ideas and maybe even have somebody listen to them.

One of the things I wanted to present, but I'm trying to cut it down as quickly as I can, is that part of our problem here today is we're looking at the wrong solution. The solution is abuse of parliamentary tradition, declining turnouts, continuous political advertising, vote splitting, etc.

My suggestion is—and that's really the gist of my paper that I presented—why don't we try to limit the power of the Prime Minister's Office incrementally, starting right now? I'm presenting this more to this side of the table than to that one.

Some of the things that you could do that would reverse some of these trends is to start by eliminating the omnibus legislation or at least modifying how the voting takes place for that, returning the per vote subsidies, having transparent financing and so on down the line, and then having advertising outside the writ period funded entirely by the party.

I have put this all in a paper, and it has been presented to the committee.

● (1710)

The Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Go ahead, Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I have a small intervention.

I suspect this may be frustrating for some of our public guests who want to make a comment. As the last gentleman said, it's difficult to get in all you want to say in two minutes.

Mr. Robert Bandurka: Thank you for referring to me as a gentleman.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: You're welcome. It was meant as a compliment.

As has been demonstrated, because of the committee's restricted time, written submissions to the committee in supplement to what is being said at the microphone should be emphasized. I know how difficult it is to try to compact a lot of feelings and thoughts about our democracy or voting systems into 120 seconds.

Mr. Robert Bandurka: That was coming from the partisan side of me. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have Mr. Kuyek, and I invite Mr. Klein to mike number two.

Mr. Kuyek, go ahead, please.

Mr. Nial Kuyek (As an Individual): Thank you for this opportunity.

For disclosure purposes, I should state that I was a candidate in Regina—Qu'Appelle in the last federal election.

I'm going to be very quick. I recommend that the committee look seriously at the mixed member proportional system as the preferred means of electoral reform, as it is far superior to first past the post or the preferential ballot.

I suggest that you look at how electronic technology can be embraced in making our electoral system more inclusive.

I suggest that we look at a phased-in system for mandatory voting and for mandatory penalties applied to that, as they have in Australia.

I suggest that the committee reject any notion of a referendum. We live in a parliamentary democracy. You were elected to make informed decisions on our behalf. I only hear Conservative MPs and local Conservative members talking about a referendum. I find that very contradictory and hypocritical, because former agriculture minister Gerry Ritz had promised a referendum on the future of the Canadian Wheat Board. On the morning after the 2011 election he was on the radio saying they now had a mandate to proceed with change. They rejected the referendum, didn't give farmers a vote, and created the change that dismantled the finest marketing institution in the world.

The Liberal, New Democratic, and Green parties had electoral reform in their platforms. You have the mandate from the last election to proceed with meaningful electoral change in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I invite Mr. Keith to mike number one while Mr. Klein speaks to us for two minutes, please.

Mr. John Klein (As an Individual): Thank you.

I noticed that I'm one of the younger people in the gallery. We're obviously missing the demographic of the twenties and the teens, so my key suggestion would be that we seriously consider lowering the voting age to 16 or 15 so that people don't grow up to be disenfranchised teenagers who can drive cars and participate in society, except to the extent of choosing their lawmakers.

That's a key change, because even if we change the electoral system, it still won't matter to teenagers. If they don't become interested in democracy at a young age, maybe they won't stay interested afterward.

Just as a quick story, when I was a teenager at university, I decided to vote where I lived, in residence, as opposed to going home to my parents' riding to vote there. Had I travelled home, I would have changed the result of the election, because it ended in a tie, so I'm responsible for a tie in parliamentary democracy voting.

That would not be a problem if we had a proportional system, because then the losers would not be totally out and not have a voice for the next four years. We really need to make a system in which everybody has a voice. Even if we don't like what they're saying, they still need to be able to participate in creating our laws.

Right now I think we have a lot of problems in addressing serious issues like climate change because, as Dr. Harding mentioned, we have local representatives who are still beholden to special interests over the interests of the entire constituency.

Thanks.

● (1715)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'd ask Mr. Dave Orban to take mike number two, and we'll go to Mr. Keith for two minutes, please. Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Ross Keith (As an Individual): My name is Ross Keith. I'm from Regina. I'm here today because I had a unique opportunity to have some very direct experience with the ranked ballot process. I have for you today one observation and one plea.

My experience was as a director of the Canadian Wheat Board. As you're probably aware, there were 10 elected representatives and five appointed representatives. I was one of the appointed. Those elected farmers ran in ridings about the size of your ridings. The experience we had with that was that there was an absolutely exponential improvement after the ranked ballot process was in.

I have an example for you, and it was very contentious, as you know. On the pro-Wheat Board side there was one farmer who was an expert in marketing. Another was an expert in transportation. They were both very strongly in favour of the board. Their supporters had to choose between persons with different expertise.

The same thing happened on the other side. There was one incumbent who was afraid to run because they might split the vote. In terms of your engagement item here, it absolutely had more power than this strict notion about PR.

My message is that I hope you plugged into that experience from the Wheat Board with the ranked ballot process. I'm assuming that you have talked to Meyers Norris and Penny, which was sort of our electoral officer, our Elections Saskatchewan or Elections Canada.

Here's my plea for you: do not let it become just a poll between PR or ranked ballot and first past the post.

At the meeting that Mr. Harding talked about, we had the minister in town the other day, and there was a member of the audience, also a member of Parliament, our local NDP member, who got up and asked for a straw vote, so people were talking then about PR, ranked ballot, and first past the post. That's not on. You can have the benefits of all.

As Mr. Harding said, this is a design exercise. You need to pick the best from proportional representation and from ranked ballot. I believe there's one on the Fair Vote Canada site—

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you. You can submit that.

Thank you. We'll take the submission for sure. We'll take your submission in writing, if you want to give us your notes.

Mr. Ross Keith: I appreciate the time. I do think that this is an incredibly important issue. Don't do a referendum.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have Mr. Orban at mike two, and then I'll ask Ms. Evans to go to mike one if she's here.

Mr. Orban, you have the floor for two minutes.

Mr. Dave A.J. Orban (As an Individual): Because the current set of political ideologies, with one exception, is devoted solely to the economic and social benefit of humans, I come here as the self-appointed spokesperson for the non-human organisms that have no voice.

As the mycologist Paul Stamets recently said, if there were a federation of organisms, humans would be voted off the planet. To give that one exceptional ideology a chance to speak for our biological cousins, we need some form of proportional representation.

Some years ago, the Law Commission of Canada came to the same conclusion in their report on electoral options for Canada, specifying mixed member proportional.

By the way, the hypothetical vote by the “United Federation of Organisms” was also for mixed member proportional, as is my personal preference.

Thank you.

● (1720)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Ms. Evans at mike number one and we'll ask Mr. Erich Keser to go to mike number two, please.

Go ahead, Ms. Evans.

Ms. Lorna Evans (As an Individual): Hello. We must change the electoral system. We must quit having majority governments with all the power a Canadian majority government has without even receiving a majority of the votes of Canadians.

It is very disheartening and frustrating for citizens when one political party has so much power to implement whatever it wants without the majority of voters' support. First past the post often leaves many of us feeling as if our votes don't count. This discourages voter participation and creates cynicism and apathy about the whole system.

In the last couple of elections, I have even considered strategic voting, which goes against what I believe about the importance of voting and of voting by conscience. That is what the first-past-the-post system does to people. I feel strongly that some type of proportional representation system would most fairly represent the choices of the electorate, particularly to tackle issues such as global warming, the most urgent issue of our time. We can't afford to have an electoral system that ignores so many of the voices of people all across the country who care about the environment. Our earth cannot endure another government like the Harper majority government, a first-past-the-post creation.

The Trudeau government is also a first-past-the-post false majority, and I am becoming increasingly concerned about its commitment to the environment. This may be a once-in-a-lifetime chance. I hope we seize this chance, get rid of first past the post once and for all, and implement a system of proportional representation under which every vote will count.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Evans.

Mr. Keser is at mike number two. In the meantime, I invite Ms. Donovan to take mike number one.

Mr. Keser, you have two minutes, please.

Mr. Erich Keser (As an Individual): In 1992, I did the research on proportional representation in Germany and Italy, and on some other systems, for the head of political science at Laurentian University as part of the report on electoral reform and party finances. It sits gathering dust in government archives 22 years later. Nothing, of course, happened with it.

I'm a dual citizen. I lived in Germany for some time. I am active in trying to keep up my German with a group of Germans. I remember having people like the head of the Canadian Light Source ask me how a party that got less that 30% of the vote could possibly exercise discipline over even its own members, the way Hitler did in Germany.

We're a unique combination, I think, of party discipline and first past the post. In other jurisdictions, in the U.K., people can disagree with their party, but not in Canada.

We were in New Zealand in 2001, and people told us how they felt. Proportional representation had come through dual referenda. The first was on changing the electoral system.

You heard what that poll, a neutral poll of public opinion, found about how satisfied Canadians are with the system. They had two referenda, and there was another attempt. The first one was overwhelming, despite the opposition of both majority parties. The second referendum ranked which system to use.

We are one of six—I looked this up in Wikipedia yesterday—major democracies that.... Over 30 stable democracies with over two million citizens use proportional representation. We've become a backwater in terms of democracy.

The Chair: Thanks very much, Mr. Keser.

Ms. Donovan is next, and I would ask Mr. Calvin Johnson to take mike number two, please.

Ms. Patricia Donovan (As an Individual): Thank you very much.

I just want to say thank you. This is an extraordinary day. I've heard four phenomenal witnesses.

You around the table are on an adventure. This is Canada. This is what I'm here for. I'm a Canadian citizen. I love Canada.

My challenge to you folks is this: listen with your hearts, and take your hats off. Your political hats are not locked on.

Stick to your principles. You've all agreed on your principles; stick to your principles, listen with your hearts, and take us forward.

Thank you.

● (1725)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Johnson is next, and then I'd like Ms. Patricia Farnese to take mike one, please.

Mr. Johnson, go ahead.

Mr. Calvin Johnson (As an Individual): Thank you.

First of all, I want to thank the panel for coming to Regina to listen to our views and our opinions. That was good advice our lady friend over here gave, to listen with your hearts and take off your political hats.

I guess we've already started a little bit of electoral reform with our fixed election dates. That's one step. I also appreciated what Mr. Boda had to say about taking enough time to get the system right and not rush into something when we don't know what's in front of us.

First of all, the voting system we have used for the last 150 years in Canada has served us well. I don't think we need to rush to fix something that isn't broken yet. Second, changing a system that's based on an election promise is a faulty premise. The promise that was made during the last election was politically motivated, and I think we need to be aware of that. Third, to have 338 of our MPs vote on this issue is a conflict of interest. I know you're MPs, but I think for 338 people to vote on something like this is not right.

I am one of the 60% of voters who did not vote for the present government, and therefore I must express my views at this hearing. I feel that the process that could be followed would be to collect voters' views and present them to all of the voters in Canada. Hopefully you're listening with your hearts. We've also received some information that will help voters determine what would work if anything is changed.

We need to have a clearly worded referendum in the 2019 election that requires a yes-or-no answer about electoral reform. That would be a very simple thing to do. Based on a vote of more than 50% for yes or no, then you could proceed to honour the intentions of the voters when the 2023 election takes place.

Let's take our time as we go forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johnson.

Ms. Farnese is next, and I will ask Jane Anweiler to take mike number two.

Ms. Patricia Farnese (As an Individual): I'm here as someone who has voted for 20-plus years in four different provinces and multiple cities. Not once has my vote been represented in government, either provincially or federally. I'm a parent of teenagers. I'm used to not being listened to, but I came here today because I'm a professor of law and a lawyer, and I'm concerned about how first past the post is undermining our rule of law.

We've become a country that is voting against things instead of for things. When you vote against someone, what you're saying to your neighbours is "Your views, your values, don't have a place in my government." We've seen political parties become more entrenched in their views, and then we ask these people to come to the table and compromise.

We don't get that anymore. We get governments—and this is federally, provincially, and across parties—that feel they have a mandate to push their agenda without compromise. That challenges the rule of law, because when my voice is not a part of making the law, it's easier for me to say that I don't have to follow the law. If that means standing in front of a bulldozer to protest a pipeline or refusing to pay your taxes, that's a problem. We need to change our voting system so we can become the democracy that we once were.

We are really risking the rule of law in Canada if we maintain this system.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much for that intervention.

If Mr. William Baker is here, he can take mike number one. Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Anweiler.

● (1730)

Ms. Jane Anweiler (As an Individual): Thank you for allowing me to speak.

My name is Jane Anweiler, and I'm speaking on my own behalf.

I want to make four brief points, hopefully.

The first one is making my vote count. This one is near and dear to my heart, because I have not had the opportunity to make my vote count lately and I believe making votes count is also one of this committee's prime goals.

During the last federal election I knocked on doors with a candidate, did leaflet drops, made phone calls from the constituency office, and cast my ballot, all for a party that I did not belong to. I felt that working for the party that I am a card-sharing member of and that I donate cash to monthly would be a waste, as my party's candidate did not have a chance of winning, and if I voted for him, my vote would not count. I was voting against a party I did not want to win instead of voting for the party I did want to win. In other words, I voted strategically.

The good news is that the candidate I worked for and voted for won, but it was not my party, and that makes me sad. I want my vote to count, and I want to vote for something and not against something. I ask you to please make that possible.

My second point is about proportional representation. Until two or three months ago, I had no real idea what this meant and I certainly did not know that many countries in the world use this system. Frankly, I thought most countries used first past the post and that only some tiny, mostly unknown countries used different voting systems. Boy, was I ever wrong. Now I know that only five or six countries still use first past the post and that a large number of countries use various proportional representation systems. My personal favourite is now called mixed member proportional representation with open lists.

The last few months have been very educational for me. I've heard that explaining and understanding proportional representation voting is very complex and confusing for voters. I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer and I've managed to figure it out, so it can't be that hard.

Anyway, are we saying that all those people in all those countries that use proportional representation are smarter than Canadians? I think we can figure it out. Proportional representation seems the best electoral system to help this committee meet its goals of more gender equality, ethnic diversity, and regional representation.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Finally, we have Mr. William Baker.

Mr. William Baker (As an Individual): On behalf of Canadians who want representative and effective government, I would respectfully demand that any electoral changes abandoning first past the post be subject to a referendum.

I attended the electoral reform consultation September 11, where we formed small groups and had to answer questions like "Do you think voting should be mandatory?", which had nothing to do with core issues of electoral reform. I thought it was a sham.

I have some questions of my own.

Why has proportional representation utterly failed the people of Spain?

Why has Italy suffered instability with proportional representation?

Why have ranked ballots been a disaster for the people of Australia?

Why do the people of British Columbia reject single transferable vote?

How can we trust the future of Canadian democracy to a committee that meets behind closed doors?

I might trust the Liberals to produce a gender neutral passport, but I don't think I trust them to tackle electoral reform, where so many parties have failed. We respectfully demand a referendum on any electoral changes that abandon 150 years of first past the post.

Consider that the British neo-fascist party had 500,000 voting members at one point and would have certainly sent members to Parliament under proportional representation. They were excluded by first past the post. The Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party recently elected a member due to redistribution of votes and ranked ballots. A member who would have been elected with a simple majority was excluded from government.

I ask that you let all Canadians decide. Canadians must have a referendum on electoral reform.

● (1735)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Baker.

Thank you to all who came to the mike and had thought about their comments in advance and were thus able to express them so succinctly and convincingly within the time allotted.

Committee members, we will now break, but if we could be back here ready to start again at 6:30 sharp, it would be appreciated. We'll have another session and another open mike a little later this evening.

We'll see you in a bit.

● (1735)

(Pause)

● (1835)

The Chair: Good evening to everyone.

This still qualifies as the 24th meeting. The 24th meeting, evening edition: let's put it that way.

Each witness will have 10 minutes to present their ideas.

We have with us Professor Lee Ward, associate professor of political science, Campion College, University of Regina. We also have Mr. Russ Husum, who I believe developed an electoral system.

Is that correct? Are you going to speak to an electoral system?

Mr. Russ Husum (As an Individual): No, it's a counting system.

The Chair: It's a counting system. Well, I'm sure it could add to our options for sure.

I believe, gentlemen, you know the format. You speak for 10 minutes, and then we have a round of questions in which each MP can engage with you for five minutes. Those five minutes include the questions and the answers.

We'll start with Professor Ward. You have 10 minutes, please.

Professor Lee Ward (Associate Professor of Political Science, Campion College, University of Regina, As an Individual): Thank you. I thank the committee for inviting me to speak tonight.

At the very dawning of political science, Aristotle observed that the primary challenge for democracy is to produce a government that reflects and aims towards the common good; that is, it serves the whole community or polis, and not just a particular faction, not even the majority.

Does the way we elect our representatives serve the common good of the whole community? In Canada, I believe the answer is no. A majority government in Canada may have as little as 39% of the votes cast in an election in which only two-thirds of eligible voters even vote; thus you wind up with governments that have acquired the active support of a subset of 25% of the total electorate claiming practically all of the power.

The problem is our outdated, distorted, and inequitable first-past-the-post system or single-member plurality electoral system. That awareness of the problem has reached new levels in Canada is demonstrated by the fact that at least three national parties ran on an election platform in the last federal election, a year ago, that included electoral reform. The proportional composition of this committee reminds us that any meaningful reform must have, if not complete consensus, at least bipartisan or multipartisan support.

The problem is clear, and so too is the solution. Canada needs to adopt an improved electoral system based on the principle of proportional representation. My preferred option is a mixed member proportional, or MMP, system that combines a certain proportion of first-past-the-post seats with an established number of top-up seats. Examples of MMP are found in Scotland, New Zealand, and Germany, as well as in the proposals advanced by the Ontario Citizens' Assembly in 2007 and the Law Commission of Canada in 2004. As this diverse array of examples shows, MMP is a flexible system that is easily adapted to the unique features of Canada's complex federal system.

The basic outline of my preferred model is as follows: we reduce the first-past-the-post ridings to between 60% and 70% of the current number. The remaining 40% to 30% of the seats will be filled by candidates elected from a regional list. Large provinces will be broken down into distinct regions for electoral purposes.

For example, Ottawa and the surrounding area would form part of an eastern Ontario region for electoral purposes. For smaller provinces, dividing into distinct regions may also be an option. For example, Saskatchewan could be a northern half and a southern half. In smaller Atlantic provinces, especially PEI, perhaps the regional top-up list would be for the entire province. These are details that could be settled in legislation or by the federal electoral boundary commissions of each province.

Either way, I think two things are clear: first, determination of regions should reflect the principle of community of interest; second, the regions should respect the contours of Canada's complex federal apportionment formula. As such, it's unlikely that the regions will be perfectly equal in size and number of MPs.

Voters would have a two-part ballot. On the first part, the voter will select the candidate running in his or her riding. On the second part of the ballot, the voter will select the party. It's the results of the second part of the ballot that will allow correction for the disproportionality produced by first past the post.

How will MPs be selected from the regional list? There are several possibilities. A closed list is determined by a process internal to political parties, whereas an open list allows the voters to select from a list of candidates provided by the parties in a manner similar to a U.S.-style primary contest.

Scotland uses a closed list. The Law Commission of Canada proposed an open list. However, my preference is a runners-up model, in which the slate of elected members the party gains for the regional list is drawn from the best runners-up of that party's candidates in that region.

I like the runners-up model for a couple of reasons.

First, these are candidates who have some electoral support in the community; they are not appointed by party leaders. In some cases these best runners-up may have acquired many thousands of votes.

Second, the runners-up model would help parties attract good candidates to run in ridings that are not considered winnable under the current system. It would give candidates and parties incentive to really invest time, energy, and resources in what would have otherwise been considered marginal ridings. The best runners-up can also provide the mechanism to replace the regional list MP who resigns.

I follow the Germans, who have a 5% threshold for regional list representation, but I agree with the Ontario Citizens' Coalition that we accept so-called “overhang seats” rather than compensate other parties, as is done in the German system.

● (1840)

In the discussion period, I would be happy to answer any questions about the details of mixed member proportional, the distribution of seats, open lists, thresholds, overhang seats, or how constituencies and regional MPs could balance constituency work and work together.

In the brief time I have left, I'll focus primarily on the philosophical, psychological, and normative dimensions of Canada's electoral reform debate.

In the 19th and 20th centuries the democratic movement was animated mainly by the battle to expand the franchise of previously marginalized groups, especially the poor; racial, linguistic, and religious minorities; women; and young adults.

In the 21st century there's a new challenge confronting democracy, which is a struggle less heroic than the suffrage movements of the past but in some respects no less important. Our task is to transform an electoral system we inherited from past centuries when these ideals of equality were only dimly perceived and to redesign the great electoral machine of democracy in order to give substantive, concrete meanings to the democratic principle of treating every vote equally. In the past we strove to expand the orbit of democratic rights; now we live in an age of enhanced social technologies that make possible the practical realization of these rights in an electoral system that empowers our citizens.

I believe mixed member proportional satisfies all of the guiding principles outlined in the public statements of the committee's directorate. It would ensure effectiveness and legitimacy by reducing the distortions of first past the post and better translate voter intentions into seats in Parliament. Mixed member proportional will also ensure a greater sense of democratic engagement, as voters will feel that every vote counts, because for all intents and purposes practically every vote will go toward electing a member of Parliament.

Mixed member proportional also promotes accessibility and inclusiveness, because under-represented and marginalized groups will be more likely to be elected to Parliament. If they are not elected from the single-member riding, then there's the additional opportunity of being elected as the candidate in the regional top-up format.

Moreover, mixed member proportional avoids undue complexity in the voting system, as it would require nothing more than adding a second party-only ballot to the traditional candidate ballot.

As for integrity, mixed member proportional would practically guarantee a power-sharing government of some kind, unlike first past the post or ranked ballot in a single-member constituency, in which efforts to compromise only a small number of votes can reward a party with total victory in a riding.

Finally, mixed member proportional enhances local representation over any electoral model that relies solely on single-member constituencies, because with mixed member proportional the typical Canadian would have more than one member representing his or her community.

I applaud the committee directorate's statement of principles guiding our examination of the various options available for reform. My one criticism is that the stated principles of effectiveness and engagement are perhaps a little too timid.

I urge the committee to consider the principle of empowerment in your deliberations. Empowerment goes beyond engagement and effectiveness. It is a radical and profoundly democratic principle. It means literally every single voter having the power to elect a representative of choice and every citizen experiencing the subjective feeling of being part of the sovereign general will of society.

This lies at the heart of my problem with the idea of a ranked ballot being used in a single-member constituency to produce a fabricated majority, which is sometimes called the “instant runoff” method. In this model, if your first choice does not have sufficient support, then the voter is told, “Don't worry; the system will take your second or even third preference and reassign it to another candidate.”

This certainly requires a greater degree of engagement for the voter, who now has to ponder the intensity of personal preferences ranging from “Great, I love this party or candidate“ to “Well, this crowd at least doesn't make me violently ill.” This may be engagement of a sort, but how is this empowering? I don't feel empowered when I go to a store to buy something only to be told I can't have what I want, but they can sell me something else I don't like as much. I feel disappointed or annoyed in that situation.

The only system that empowers the voters is one that ensures, to the greatest extent possible, every individual's vote—their first choice, their real choice—will help elect their representative in Parliament.

● (1845)

Parties lose elections and candidates lose elections, but the voter should win every election. The electoral system that most contributes to this sense of empowerment is PR, whether it produces proportionality through regional top-up seats or some other way.

In conclusion, now is the time to take seriously the new creed of innovation that is sweeping through all of our political, economic, and social organizations. On every university campus in Canada, we see signs heralding innovation and transformation. Can it really be the case that we are thoroughly unsentimental about every aspect of our communal life, except the way we elect our members of Parliament?

The principles of justice may be eternal, but the mechanical structures and the social technology of democracy need to be revamped and improved periodically. Canadians are ready for a more consensual and inclusive form of political representation.

Future generations will say we did a good thing in introducing proportional representation. They may just wonder what took us so long.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor Ward.

Go ahead, Mr. Husum, for ten minutes, please.

Mr. Russ Husum: I want to thank you for having me here, and I want to thank all of you for all the time I have watched you on TV. I know the hours you're putting in, and now you're going across the country. It's a lot of time. As a citizen, I appreciate all the work.

I'm going to talk about a couple of things, and a third one if I get some time. You are going to hear a differing opinion here.

First I want to talk about accounting systems for the alternative vote electoral system. I will refer to the alternative vote system as “ranked ballot” from here on. When I say “ranked ballot”, that's what I'm talking about.

Then I'd like to talk about the citizens' assembly process that lead to the referenda in B.C. in 2005-2009, because that's actually where I live.

Third, if there's some time, I'll just touch on the claim that the ranked ballot creates even larger false majorities than first past the post. I may not get to that.

I only have my talking notes right now. You will be getting copies of my presentation. With the short notice, I didn't have time for translation and distribution, so I apologize for that.

As you alluded to, Mr. Chair, I wanted to talk to you about the Borda count system for the ranked ballots. I don't believe that's come up in any of the discussions so far. Maybe some of you are familiar with it.

When we count the ranked ballot in the usual way, we usually drop the person with the least first preferences, and then reassign the second preferences. This process is continued until somebody has 50% of the vote.

There are some concerns with the regular ranked ballot counting, and the Borda count method takes care of them. I'll go over three of them right now.

Sometimes, when you drop the first candidate—the lowest candidate with the least first-choice preferences—you can drop the candidate who is actually most preferred. That's referred to on the Elections Canada website in one of their documents.

Also, the regular accounting method can sometimes inadvertently pick a majority winner when in reality they are not the most preferred candidate.

Finally, one of the criticisms of the ranked ballot is that second and third preferences that are reassigned should not be worth as much as the first preference. I see that as a valid criticism. That also is one of the concerns, and it's taken care of by the Borda count.

The Borda count method is simple to use, and for the reasons that follow, it gives a more accurate result than simply dropping people off if they are the lowest first-preference candidate.

First off, no candidate is dropped. Second, every preference level of every ballot is used to calculate the total. Third, every preference on a ballot is given a value according to its preference position.

For example, if you had six candidates, the first vote would be worth six points to a candidate. Then the second vote would be worth five points, then four, then three. If there were eight candidates, the first would be worth eight points and then seven points, and so on.

Let's say you have five candidates running. A first preference vote is worth five points to each candidate. Let's say Mary Smith gets 10,000 first-place votes. She gets five times 10,000. If she gets 5,000 second-place votes, she gets four times 5,000. Those are totalled up for each candidate, so in the end you get a more accurate total then simply dropping people off.

Second, I wanted to move to the citizens' assembly and the referendum in B.C. When I talk about the single transferable vote, I'll usually say STV, just to keep it shorter. If I talk about proportional representation, I'll say PR.

We're talking about referenda and citizens' assembly, and I think there are some important lessons to be drawn from what happened in B.C. The whole process looked very democratic on the surface, but I don't think it served the citizens as well as it should have, and I don't think the citizens' assembly served the citizens as well as it should have.

First off, we had one choice only, which was the single transferable vote, or STV. It's a cumbersome system. It has a very complex counting system. I think they were trying to keep it simple, and they were promoting it as “simple as one, two, three”, but it's not simple. It's actually quite complex, as I said. I think the ordinary citizen—in fact, I'm sure the ordinary citizen—would have trouble doing the math when you're counting for STV.

● (1850)

To defend the complex nature of STV, they used the statement that you don't have to understand the inner workings of a car or a computer to use one, implying that you could use STV but not understand it, and that would be fine. However, I think one of the things that's very important for the committee to keep in mind is that the system, including the counting system, has to be easily understood by all voters, or by the majority of voters. I know you've heard that before, but I think the citizens' assembly and the whole process out in B.C. is an example of that.

Yet there was that 58% in 2005. I think it won almost because it slipped in under the radar, almost under the cover of the ranked ballot portion of the single transferable vote, because when you talked to people—and I talked to probably hundreds of people between the vote in 2005 and the revote in 2009—it became pretty clear that people voted for change. That was the word I heard all the time—change—but when you asked them more questions about it, they didn't really understand much beyond the simple one, two, and three. They understood that it was a ranked ballot, but they didn't understand a whole lot more beyond that. There was some perception of larger ridings, but they didn't understand the consequences. I think that's important to note.

You remember the two professors you had here from Ireland. I think Mr. Kenney asked if having referenda in Ireland was a positive experience. Professor Gallagher said that it was, that they've had a lot of referendums. He made another couple of statements and then said that he would refer it to his colleague. Right away, Professor Marsh said no, that it hadn't been a positive experience, with a few exceptions, and that he would have to disagree. He said that voters basically did not understand or weren't aware of what they voted for, and they weren't aware of what the results of that vote would be.

In the example here in B.C. that I was talking about, they knew they would have a larger riding, for example, but in my riding in Vancouver, it would have been six times larger. We would have had six small ridings combined into one, which would have resulted in maybe six times the number of candidates. They hadn't thought about maybe having 20, 25, or 30 candidates.

I want to say that the PR lobby is very strong in Canada, and it's the PR system that prevailed in the citizens' assemblies in Ontario and B.C. as well as in the commission in P.E.I. before the referenda in all three of those provinces. The voters wound up with nothing each time. That's my main concern. I felt that we would have been better served in B.C. if we'd had at least a couple of options—a simpler ranked ballot, maybe, and then the proportional representation of choice, but they went with the single transferable vote.

PR always does well in opinion polls. It's been well promoted. It's intuitively easy to understand. On the surface, it seems fair. However, it's a fairly major change to our current system.

Each attempt to reform has always pushed for the implementation of a full PR change. I'm not totally against PR, but I'm just saying that for now, how about ensuring that the voters don't walk away empty-handed? That's my main point. I suggest going for a smaller and easier-to-implement improvement that is within the voters' comfort zone at this point, and to maybe revisit things in a couple of election cycles. I'm hoping that we do get some reform, but I think it's important to keep it simple, easy to understand, easy to use, easy to count, and easy to implement, and, of course, it has to be fair as well.

I don't know how my time is, Mr. Chair.

● (1855)

The Chair: You're pretty much on the money there.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Russ Husum: All right. Well, my stove at home is programmed to 10 minutes. It can set itself now.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That was very interesting.

We'll start with Ms. Sahota, please, for five minutes.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Husum, you talked about a different counting system, the Borda system. I guess that's what it's called. I haven't heard of it this whole time—

Mr. Russ Husum: I'm glad somebody hadn't.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Would this change the results? We've been hearing that AV or ranked ballots would just create larger false majorities. Does assigning points and adding them up in this system create a result that is different from doing it with the drop-off method?

Mr. Russ Husum: Yes, it can, and that's one of the things you will get. I have some charts and tables.

I believe it's because when you drop something off, you don't know how it's relating to the second and third votes. You're looking at the first preference, so you drop the lowest one, but quite often the lowest one can be really strong for everybody else, so that will pull them up.

The ranked ballot is a type of consensus. That's at the voter level. Proportional representation is more the consensus up in the House, in Parliament, where everybody's assigned based on first preference, but this is a consensus. You're looking deeper into it.

Yes, if you start dropping somebody off, you don't know how "B" interacts with the second choices of the other people, whereas the Borda count doesn't drop anybody. It assigns a value. If they're first, they get a higher value than second place and third place. It's a more accurate way.

It's a well-known system. It's not something I invented. There are different ways you can do it, too. You can sometimes give even more to the first position if you want to. You could do five plus one, for example, and make it worth six, and then the second one worth four, and three, and two. It's just a different way of counting. It's simple.

● (1900)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: It is simple, but what we keep hearing a lot is "Does my vote count?" At the end of the day, do you feel that implementing this kind of change would give people the satisfaction that their vote counts? I would preface that with all the people who have come here saying that everyone's vote is going to count under this system or another. That's not accurate either, because—

Mr. Russ Husum: It doesn't, no. I know.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: —you could have a huge riding where you still vote for a small party that may never get a representative under any system, whether it be MMP or STV. There might still be a small portion, but I guess we're trying to do the greatest amount of good that—

Mr. Russ Husum: Well, they're actually sizeable. In an STV system, if you have three candidates, there would be, I think, one out of four votes wasted. It's always one more than the number of candidates. The way you calculate the threshold is that you're always going to be almost one candidate out. If you have three people in a riding, about 75% will count and 25% won't. If there are four people in a riding, you'll get about 80% that count and 20% that won't, so when we say that every vote will count, every vote doesn't count all the time. None of these, I don't think, ever make it.

Proportional is probably better than ranked ballot in terms of.... I'm not trying to pretend that it'll make more votes count with the ranked ballot, but I don't want to again lose the chance to improve things, and the ranked ballot is probably the easiest thing to implement, because you don't change any ridings or things like that. It's just that this way of counting is a little more accurate for the ranked ballot, but it's not something that I came up with at all. It's a way of counting.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: In my last minute, I'd like to ask Professor Ward a question.

You said that you would elaborate a bit more about how, under MMP, representatives would share constituency work versus parliamentarians' duties. How would you see that happening?

Prof. Lee Ward: I think one example is in Scotland. Sometimes MPs, or MSPs, of the same party will split up a region. If you're from the Glasgow region list, you can divide the north part of the city and the south part of the city, or you can have particular issues. If the environment is your particular concern, constituents can call and speak to me. If it's something else, like your trash licence, you can call—

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Who would make this call? How would you divide this up? The candidates would, after being elected—

Prof. Lee Ward: I'm thinking in terms of sitting MPs. They would decide. They could specialize, or it can be done regionally. In Scotland, sometimes they do it at different times of the week. On Monday and Tuesday I have surgery, let's say, and then you're Thursday and Friday. If you have the same party, essentially it's the same voter.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You could essentially make sub-ridings, say, which are similar to the ones we have at the end of the day, and then there's still the rest of it.

Prof. Lee Ward: You could.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: But people who live within that riding would still feel that their representative was not somebody they voted for.

Prof. Lee Ward: Well, yes, and yet you also wouldn't be locked into a particular representative who you feel doesn't represent you at all. In a city the size of Glasgow, a million people, you could have an MP from your region that you would identify with, or you could have multiple MPs, or you could have.... Nobody says that in their specific part of the city that they have to call so-and-so because that's the person who's charged with representing them. You have more options in that sense, and you literally would have more than one MP.

The Chair: Mr. Reid is next.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you. I had intended initially to direct my questions toward Professor Ward, but I'm going to pose my first question to Mr. Husum.

You indicated the number of wasted votes under the proportional system. Within an STV district, for example, it is going to be essentially the percentage or fraction that is the number of candidates minus one. Is that correct? If you have three candidates—three vacancies, effectively—it would be one-quarter of the votes, which is 25%, that would be wasted. Did I understand that correctly?

● (1905)

Mr. Russ Husum: No. Remember when the professors from Ireland were talking? I think the example they used was five candidates, and they said approximately one-sixth are wasted.

When you're calculating the quota in that, you're always adding one, so if it's four candidates and 10,000 votes, and you divide that by four evenly, it's 2,500 each, but if you add one to get 2,501, then you can't get four times 2,501 out of 10,000. It's that remainder that's wasted.

Mr. Scott Reid: Professor, you were suggesting a model of regional divisions in a province. As opposed to having proportionality within the province of Ontario, you suggested that the eastern Ontario region, including the city of Ottawa, would be severed off. I happen to represent a riding in that area, and I just looked it up. There are eight ridings in the city of Ottawa. There are eight rural, small-town ridings that include the city of Kingston. That gives you an idea.

That's a total of 16. You'll see why I'm mentioning this. I don't know if you chose that example with that number in mind, but it would mean that effectively one-sixteenth of votes would be lost and would not be factored into the proportionality. That works out to about 6.25%.

The reason I mention it is that if this system were used, it would have the effect of essentially eliminating the Green Party entirely, with the exception of Ms. May's seat, assuming that her seat remains the same. The reason is that the Green Party—and I'm looking across provinces here—got about 3.5% or 3.25% in the last election. It did better in some provinces—British Columbia got 8%, for example—but a 5% cut-off removes the Green Party from getting any seats in most provinces to start with. If you then subdivide a region like British Columbia into 16 member seats, that effectively removes it again.

I would argue that if we're trying to design an MMP system with the goal of maximizing proportionality, we first ought to set the cut-offs very low, and then I would argue that it would be problematic to create macro-districts or regions within provinces. We would be better off having a single list for each province. If you move away from that, you start getting the kind of problem that I just alluded to.

Prof. Lee Ward: Thank you for the question. On the threshold, I'm a little bit agnostic. I think 5% is logical. The Ontario Citizens' Assembly says 3%, and I could live with that as well.

I also think that when you change the system, you change the motivation of the voter. I can't help but think there might be some people today or in the past who would have voted for a political party, the Green Party, but maybe didn't because they thought they were wasting their vote.

Even a threshold of 5%, I think, is achievable. Once parties have this representation, then you can see them in a venue. You can see them in Parliament, and you're impressed or you're not impressed, whatever the case might be. We can't just use the past as prologue, in that sense.

I could be persuaded that 3% is a better threshold, absolutely.

In terms of breaking up the province, I think the regions preserve a certain notion of community of interest. The concern I would have with treating the whole province of Ontario as one regional list is that you want to guarantee that somebody from the Ottawa region is going to be on that list. One way to do that is to break the region up so that the party list, if you had an open list from which you'd actually select, would have people from the region. Then you'd know there would be representatives of the proportional—

Mr. Scott Reid: Would you still have riding MPs?

Prof. Lee Ward: You'd still have riding MPs.

Mr. Scott Reid: You would use a model in which 60% of the MPs would be from ridings; ridings would presumably be 60% larger on average, if we had the same number of MPs, but still, that would be who your local person would be.

My riding, which has about 100,000, now goes to being part of a riding that has 160,000, but that is still the local person.

Prof. Lee Ward: The concern would be that the region has to be entirely populated by people from downtown Toronto, which in principle it could be. I don't know any party that would do that, but you could in principle do that. That would be one way to guarantee that even the regional list includes that sense of representation.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. Thank you for that.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses. It's nice having...I won't say opposing, but differing views in front of us.

Mr. Ward, you talked about the runners-up, the extra MPs, the proportional part of the MPs coming from a runners-up list rather than an open or closed or party list at whatever regional level. You're saying that if there's a proportional seat that will go to the Conservatives, it's the next most popular Conservative as chosen by the electorate.

Prof. Lee Ward: Right.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Okay. The other lists were just general comments.

Mr. Husum, I have two concerns. One is that the system you've suggested to us isn't proportional, just to confirm. In the two families of voting systems, if there are two broad families, one is the proportional side. If the voters vote 20%, it tries to translate that into 20% of the seats and 20% of the power.

The second concern—we've had a bunch of research that's been brought to the committee—is that there's a preference for centrist parties. We use this for leadership races. People are familiar with a similar type of system for leadership races, or nomination races within a riding in some cases, in which one person is going forward.

To Mr. Ward's point about satisfaction, my concern is from looking at this through the eyes of the voter. Using the point system or whatever system we use to count, if it's still my third preference who represents me, why am I meant to be more happy? If the results in Parliament are not at all proportional to what people had actually intended, and the counting and the voting turned it into my will, why am I leaving this exercise happier than when I went in?

● (1910)

Mr. Russ Husum: I'm not saying that's the be-all and end-all. I'm presenting Borda count as a different way of counting. Personally, I kind of like what the law commission had proposed, although I don't like using first past the post with mixed member proportional. They use it in Germany, and I'd like—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Essentially, you could see using a proportional system, and then the voting within it could take place the way you've divined.

Mr. Russ Husum: I could see that. What I'm also saying, though, is that we've had chances for reform. Take B.C., for example; the voters got nothing out of that. The ranked ballot at least improves on what we have.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: But we've heard testimony that says that's not the case.

Mr. Russ Husum: Well, you know what?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: You disagree.

Mr. Russ Husum: I disagree totally. There's lots of testimony, and they say lots of things.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Let me perhaps challenge one supposition, this notion of incremental change.

Parliament has been studying this thing for 95 years. We don't do this very often, if ever. We have this moment in front of us. My brief time in Parliament has shown me that when there are moments, there are moments, and they can flitter away like the attention span of a gnat in the way things come up and go down, and Twitter has made it worse.

Why not go for a proportional system, even a proportional system that you've suggested, modified so that the counting is not done by first past the post but in a modified way?

Mr. Russ Husum: As I said, I'm fine with that, but don't lose the opportunity to make some improvement. If you have to sacrifice....

All the guests you've had have talked about trade-offs. Everything has been about trade-offs. You know, we lost that chance in B.C., and—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Well, they set a bad bar. The challenge when you get into referendums is that it depends on whether or not the government of the day actually champions it. They didn't in B.C. and they didn't in Ontario.

I have a quick question for Mr. Ward before I run out of time.

One of the concerns I had about what you proposed today is that you hinted that ridings would get larger. I represent rural northern British Columbia, and it's pretty darn big already. Have you looked at any other models that avoid that particular concern?

Prof. Lee Ward: Yes. In terms of trade-offs, it's a question of the size of the House. If you're willing to increase the size of the House, then you don't have to actually change the size of the ridings. I think it's considered hard to sell politically, and that was seen as one of the downsides in the case of Ontario.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: We'd be fine, us rural folks, with the city folks having less. We're okay to sacrifice that.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Nathan Cullen: If Toronto wants to take one on the chin for the rest of the country, so be it.

That's not on the record, is it, Chair? I love Toronto. Go, Jays.

Voices: Oh, oh!

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move on to Mr. Ste-Marie for five minutes.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Good evening, gentlemen. Thank you for coming to present your points of view. It's very interesting.

I would like to start with a question for Mr. Husum. In fact, I'll repeat the question my colleague Ms. Sahota asked.

There are polls where we see the first, second and third choices of citizens. Have you applied this data to your model to see the results?

You just said that you have done this exercise, but it seemed more theoretical. Did you use real data? I'm interested in knowing whether, when your model is applied, the distortions between the percentage expressed for each party and the number of seats is less and, if so, what the extent of the reduction is.

● (1915)

[*English*]

Mr. Russ Husum: I'll answer in English.

This is all theoretical. Every exercise I've worked with has been theoretical. As for how it would play out in reality, it should work the same way, but to say that I've actually seen it in an election, I'm not sure. There are different ways that it's used, but I don't know that it's actually used in the political system.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: It still worries me. As Yogi Berra said, the difference between theory and practice is that, in theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is. We should see what it is.

Do any countries use a system that works with a scoring system as you present it?

[*English*]

Mr. Russ Husum: I don't think so. As far as I know, Australia is the only country that actually uses the ranked ballot, so this really would be a made-in-Canada system. As for the Borda count, I think they use it for things like the Academy Awards or for sports, maybe, but nothing bigger than that.

Voices: Oh, oh!

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: You have just got my colleague, Mr. Cullen, interested.

I read the document you sent to us with interest. If you can apply the survey data to the model, you could then send us the results. I would be very interested in that.

Mr. Ward, I have a lot of questions for you too. Thank you for your presentation. It was dynamic, to say the least. It was very good.

Having said that, I still have a concern about the model that you are proposing. As my colleague, Mr. Cullen, said, our constituencies have 100,000 residents. If we ended up in a constituency with half a million people, it would be difficult to maintain contact with them.

You gave the example of Scotland, where regions can be separated afterwards. That is one way of going about it. Try to convince me some more.

[*English*]

Prof. Lee Ward: The trade-off is that even in the larger ridings you will have more representation, so that you in fact may have somebody who.... It's a larger area, but you can in fact contact someone who thinks the same way you do about these things.

Hopefully, even the larger size wouldn't mean that it's more distant. I'm from Scotland. My family is Scottish. I always laugh because they say, "I have four representatives and I can choose who I want to call to represent me." I think, "Well, lucky you." Hopefully, we would have a similar system in Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you.

I have another quick question.

Unfortunately, I am disenchanted with politics. They did a similar exercise in Quebec. They wanted to establish a proportional system. However, when a party is in opposition, it supports the proportional system, but once it gets into power through the current system, it doesn't want to change anymore.

If that was the case with the current government, apart from a proportional system as you are suggesting, what might be some other ways to improve the electoral system?

[*English*]

Prof. Lee Ward: If I understand the question, it's about how would you correct the party in power.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Yes, what other less significant way—

[*English*]

The Chair: What would your second choice be?

Prof. Lee Ward: My second choice would be some kind of multi-member constituency with STV, because you have greater choice, but the virtue of that system is that it produces only some proportionality. Let's not settle for "some"; let's do an actual proportional system. It must be multi-member constituencies.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: As regards the proportional—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ste-Marie. Unfortunately, you have no more time left.

We now move to Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I want to start with questions for you, Professor Ward. Then I hope I can get to you, Russ, as a fellow British Columbian.

There's this issue around thresholds. I'm picking up on a conversation that Scott Reid and I are having across the table about the Green Party and the cut-off. I wanted to agree with your point about a different voting system. I'm not taking a position on this at the moment, but I wouldn't fear a 5% cut-off if we were in a system in which there were lists and you had to have a threshold.

After the strategic voting wave of 2015, we talked to a lot of pollsters who watched what happened to our vote. We lost half of our vote in the last week of the campaign, and that was because people began to say, "Right; I have to stampede to the party that I want to vote for strategically." It sounds like a pathetic turnout and it's hard for me to look at it and say that we only got 3.5% of the popular vote, but when I look at all the other parties in Canada combined, the smaller ones, I see that they got less than 2% of the vote.

We do hear a lot in the back-and-forth about the downside of PR when people talk about smaller extremist parties that make it into parliaments. They're usually talking about the Knesset very specifically. I will give you a wide open moment to say anything you want to add about how using your preferred choice of what sometimes gets called "the best loser", but which you kindly call "the runner-up", would mitigate against extremist parties getting a foothold.

● (1920)

Prof. Lee Ward: I think it would, because you would have to make an argument that would have some resonance in the community. You'd have to have some kind of response.

To be clear, if you have mixed member proportional, you will have single-member ridings, and you could have a situation in which a candidate wins a riding but his or her party doesn't meet the threshold, a situation they call "overhangs".

In the German system, when you have an overhanging seat, you compensate with seats for the other parties, for mathematical reasons that I'm sure Russ could explain better that I could, or you could go the route of saying, "No, we'll just let it stand", so if you have a very popular candidate who may be an extremist and for some reason is very popular in that riding, it's contained to that riding. It isn't something that meets the threshold, so therefore it won't be included in the calculations for the proportionality.

However, it also means that a really good candidate could win in a riding, could excel, and that party would see benefits later on. People might say, “I really like that candidate. I'm going to think about that party in a way I hadn't thought about it before.” I think it would work both ways.

I think extremism is a function of political culture rather than of the system. We are not an extreme country. It's true that we are a regional country and at times that has led to extreme problems, but I think PR would reduce the sense of regional blocs being represented in Parliament, because you should, in principle, see greater representation of all the major parties in various parts of the country, and you would still have avenues for smaller parties to break through. I think it's the best kind of balance of them all.

Again in response to Mr. Reid's question, I am agnostic about the threshold. I don't think 5% is.... I mean, that is unique to German history. There was a history of extremism in Germany, so it made sense, but I'm not sure Canada is Germany, and I think that probably a 3% threshold would work. That would be the kind of debate I would love to see us have, because we'd have moved forward so far in that case if we did.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I'm very attracted to your idea that we need a principle of empowerment. I like the five principles that have come down to us. The minister put them forward. They are the basis of the mandate of this committee, and in seeking a new voting system, we should attempt to be constantly mindful of these five principles, which include, of course, local representation and fairness and simplicity. The notion of going beyond encouraging participation to delivering empowerment, I think, is one that we should take on.

I don't really have a question. Perhaps you want to add to the reasons that you think empowerment is a much more powerful concept than mere participation is.

Prof. Lee Ward: I'm concerned about declining voter turnout in Canada. As a professor, I am always struck by the fact that my students love Canada and think it's a wonderful country and everything's great, but our voter turnout is pretty low. They say that's something that happens in bad countries where things aren't working well, and I say, well, not necessarily, but it's a problem, and it has to be addressed.

To Ms. Sahota's point earlier, to me it's true that you can't have a system in which every single vote will count, but we should have a bad conscience about the lack of representation. We accept whatever that threshold is as a kind of necessity, but I think we cross a psychological barrier when we say that the intention of the system is not to create winners and losers but rather just to determine what the people have said.

I would say to my students on election night, “What's your first question?” They would say, “Who won?” I would say, “Shouldn't it be 'what did the people say?' ” The second question is which party won, but the most important thing is what the people said, so we should move in that direction.

● (1925)

The Chair: I was so enthralled about what you were saying, I lost track of time. You're just a little bit over there, so we're going to move to Mr. Aldag.

Mr. John Aldag: Thanks to both of our witnesses for being here.

I'm intrigued with the ranked ballot discussion simply because we haven't heard a whole lot about it.

I'm going to start with you, Mr. Husum, about why we should have an alternative vote. That was the first thing I wrote down, just because we haven't heard a lot of people go there. As you were speaking, I wrote down a couple of things, one of them being that it's easier to implement change. Beyond that, is there anything that really leads you to this as a solution or an improvement over what we have now?

Mr. Russ Husum: Well, it's an improvement. I guess that's the main thing. I'm saying that we've had chances before. People seem hesitant about this big change, and I'm just saying that the ranked ballot is easy to implement and it does make an improvement. There will be varying opinions as to the degree of improvement. It's not proportional, clearly not, but it's definitely not first past the post anymore.

Take Ms. May and the Green Party; you could try voting for them, knowing that your second preference will still take effect.

Arend Lijphart from San Diego talked to you. He was interviewed by the CBC, and he said that the ranked ballot would be better than first past the post and it wouldn't squeeze out, he thought, smaller parties, which is one of the things you hear and that I don't quite get. If first past the post hasn't squeezed out small parties, then why would a ranked ballot? With a ranked ballot, you can at least take chance on a party, knowing that your second preference will still count. I agree with him; I don't think it will squeeze out small parties.

My point is that I just don't want to lose another chance to improve the system. I'm not against maybe moving to some form of proportional representation, but maybe that's step number two at some point. I don't like it that there's no representation except Liberals in Atlantic Canada, for example. I don't think that's good. There's a lot of blue representation in Saskatchewan and Alberta, for example. The Green Party is under-represented, for example. I don't like that, but let's not walk away with no improvement. I believe the ranked ballot is an improvement over what we have.

Mr. John Aldag: Thank you.

Since we started this, I've been out. I've done five town halls so far. As we talk about change, I always do a bit of a straw poll about how many people want change, and the number of people who say, yes, they want change has been fairly overwhelming, but when we start poking into it, we start seeing people pulling back a bit on some of the systems when fairly drastic change is involved. When we start talking about things like minority governments and coalition governments, a lot of the people I've spoken with have hesitated. I'm not putting words in their mouths, but I hear the message that there's some hesitation to going that way, that Canadians kind of like their majority governments.

Does the system you're proposing, the counting method, it lend itself, as we've heard often happens, to more majorities, or will it bring parties a bit closer to the centre in having to find some collaboration because they're going for that second vote?

Mr. Russ Husum: I think you'd have more centrist parties. I don't think it would change the complexion a lot, other than I could take a chance on the Green Party, for example. That would be my first vote, then, if I was going to vote, knowing that my second vote.... I think it might help a little bit like that.

Mr. Cullen mentioned about the bar being high in B.C. and that otherwise 58% would have passed, but what's the point of it passing if about 55% of that 58% didn't know what they were voting for? That's my point. I really do think that hardly anybody knew what they voted for in detail, because it wasn't presented in detail. It was presented as simple as one, two, three, and they understood that.

I don't think a ranked ballot will change the makeup a lot. The change will be that you'll get a government that the majority of the people actually want. You won't have somebody slipping up the middle, and that's what's happened.

● (1930)

Mr. John Aldag: Okay.

Really quickly, Professor Ward, do you think this idea of going to the alternative vote as perhaps a transitional step would be a step in the right direction, or are you an all-in kind of guy who would like to see us simply go for a greater PR kind of system?

Prof. Lee Ward: I think we have a historic opportunity to produce something, some kind of PR. That said, it's good to look at the electoral system as a mechanism, as something that isn't sacrosanct. In fact, it's not good in itself, but is meant to serve a purpose. Like everything in life, if it's not serving a purpose, then you fix it or you replace it.

I like the idea that we're looking at electoral systems as things you get your hands on, like looking under the hood of the car. I like that, but I would also like to seize the historic opportunity and move to a PR system.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now move to Mr. Rayes.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Good evening.

Mr. Ward, like Mr. Ste-Marie, I really liked how dynamic your presentation was.

However, there is one aspect that I cannot support. At the end of one of your comments, you referred to a third world country. I have been living in Canada for about 45 years now. When I look at the country that we have built with our governments, even if they are not perfect in representative terms, I consider that we are a long way from the third world. I just wanted to make that clear.

Professor Loewen, who testified before us when we were in Ottawa, made an observation about representation. People who talk about a proportional voting system or a mixed-member proportional system in all its forms, talk a lot about better representation in Parliament. He told us to be very careful because representation in Parliament and representation in government are two different things. The political parties might actually be better represented in Parliament in terms of votes. However, the government could be made up of a coalition of parties that failed to win a majority. We could easily be talking about one party with 45% of the votes and a small party with 6%. That is one scenario. They would then be represented in the government, which would in turn be making the decisions. However, a second party with 35% of the votes would have no representation at all in government for four years. That had an impact on me. It was the first time that anyone, a university professor in this case, had mentioned it to us.

I would like to hear your specific opinion. Are you of the same mind? He was the first witness to really mention it and it is quite important.

[*English*]

Prof. Lee Ward: Thank you very much.

First of all, I didn't mean to say that Canada was a third world country in any way at all. If anything, I'm trying to say that our representation is outdated, not necessarily backwards or not progressive. I think Canada has succeeded very well. I'm sorry if I gave that impression.

On government representativeness, there is a legitimate concern about how any major change to proportional representation would alter our understanding of the opposition. I understand that the opposition is an integral principle in Canadian parliamentary democracy. There will be a party with 35% that is not in the government, and that's a healthy thing. I would agree that we don't want absolute consensus and parties forming alliances to reach 50% or 60% of the population. The other 40% have to play a role in Parliament as an effective opposition.

The principle of opposition is something that is precious, and fragile in a sense. I think we must be careful not to sweep away the beneficial properties of having an opposition that's active and sees its primary job as criticizing government policy.

The specific concern of small parties making the difference, if you like, goes back to Ms. May's point about the Knesset, where very small parties blackmail major blocs. That is a concern. One way to look at that is to see that a flourishing multi-party democracy is the solution to that problem. The problem in Israel, with all due respect, is that they have two major parties and then very small parties that will always play that role in between.

If we have more competitive parties—three, four, or five competitive parties—I think you'll find that you won't have one very small group that can hold governments hostage in that sense, hopefully.

● (1935)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

You only have about five seconds. Time flies.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Did you count the time the speakers needed to put on their headsets?

The Chair: I am sorry, Mr. Rayes. You are right. You still have 45 seconds.

Mr. Alain Rayes: I will be quick.

Mr. Ward, are you for or against people being able to express their opinions by means of a referendum in order to ratify a change in the method of voting?

[*English*]

Prof. Lee Ward: I support a referendum. I support a referendum on all kinds of issues. I think the referendum has to be an intelligent one, though, and it has to be comparing apples with apples. I think there should be a sunset clause in the legislation whereby, after two elections with a new system, we have a referendum to compare it with the old one so that the public has a genuine choice. I wouldn't buy a car without a test drive.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes: At the moment, Justin Trudeau's government is leaning towards a preferential system.

If he decided on a system like that rather than a mixed-member proportional system, would you accept that, given that he has a majority?

[*English*]

Prof. Lee Ward: I would agree to a referendum after two elections to make sure that we could make a correction, absolutely. Supporting a referendum today in support of a ranked ballot would be hard for me. It would be hard for me to do that.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rayes.

Mrs. Romanado, the floor is yours

[*English*]

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much.

Thanks to both of you for your testimony on this late evening in Regina. I appreciate having the two views.

We hear a lot about possible solutions or alternative voting systems for us, but often we don't get into the nitty-gritty of what it is actually going to take to implement if we adopt it, or what the possible consequences are of implementing it.

Professor Ward, you mentioned something, and my little thingy went up and went ding, ding, ding—sorry. It's been a long day.

You mentioned that there might be some rejigging of boundaries and so on, which always makes me a little nervous, because we just went through the exercise last year, and at the end of the day, as much as we want to make sure that whatever it is we're choosing is what Canadians want, we also have to be mindful of the costs.

I'm a little concerned that compared to something that might be very simple to implement, implementing something as elaborate as what you're suggesting would come at a significant cost. I'm just throwing this out there, because it's not a guiding principle, but it is something that we have to be mindful of as representatives of the Canadian taxpayer. I can't go to Canadians and say, “Listen, I'm sorry, but you're not going to get *x* amount of money out of the budget for this, because we spent a lot of it changing the system.”

I need to make sure that we understand what the ramifications are of whatever it is that we're going to propose when we're doing this exercise. I haven't been able to get witnesses to tell me concretely what all the costs and all the ramifications are of choosing system X or system Y, but that will definitely factor into our recommendation. Do you have any data for that?

Prof. Lee Ward: No, I don't have any data, but I'm trying to think logically what the costs would be. In terms of districting, we re-district anyway under the federal electoral boundaries act, so that's just natural. That happens every census. That's in the law.

In terms of drawing new districts, I'm assuming that it would be the non-partisan boundary commissions doing this, working with Elections Canada. It's their job. Would Elections Canada need more funding? I assume it would, but I don't see that it would be exorbitant, and I don't think it would be the kind of thing that would require a great deal of ongoing costs.

There would be something at the initial stage, the implementation stage. There would be some upfront costs, although I can't for the life of me really see the cost being all that much more than it would be now. We'd have different ballots. We'd have to construct the ballots, so I'm sure we'd have focus groups and studies to figure it out so that our ballots are fair and we aren't constructing them in a way that's unfair, but we do that now. Elections Canada is already doing that.

If we are talking about adding seats to the House of Commons, then there's a cost. In the MMP option that I raised tonight, you wouldn't have to do that. We wouldn't have to add any seats to the House.

I actually don't think there would be an exorbitant cost in making a change that conceptually is very dramatic—and I don't deny that—but structurally, I don't think it would alter things very much at all. In terms of the actual daily life of you MPs as your ridings get bigger, yes, I suppose there would be adjustments to MPs' budgets. I'm sure that if you have larger ridings and greater travel, that should be factored in, but again, I don't think it would seriously have an impact in terms of finances.

● (1940)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: In terms of public awareness campaigns and education to inform Canadians about a new system, obviously, whatever it is that we choose, we're going to need to have that outreach effort. I appreciate your feedback on that.

Professor Husum, would you like to add to that? The system that you proposed was a little simpler. It didn't involve boundary changes and it didn't involve significant changes to the current electoral system. Could you give me a sense of the feasibility of implementation?

Mr. Russ Husum: To be honest, I don't know. I assume it would be relatively easy, just because you won't change boundaries. Even in the case of the ballot, instead of making an X, you'd do 1, 2, 3, 4. There will be more entailed in the counting.

I think it would be simple, in that sense. If at some point there was a partial proportional representation added, I don't know how much it cost to redraw the electoral boundaries the last time, but it might be the same amount for a new system.

Just don't lose the opportunity now. At least walk away with something, and this is a simple system that I think improves our system over first past the post.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Benson.

Ms. Sheri Benson: Thank you, Chair, and thank you both for your presentations.

Professor Ward, I thought I would direct my questions to you first. You talked a little about the conversations you were having with young people in your class, and people asking questions about who won and why people aren't engaged. Could you talk about the challenge of getting people out to vote under a different system under which there is an impact when someone becomes involved?

What I hear a lot now is that we should stay in the safety zone of first past the post, because it's something everybody knows. I would challenge that. Many people don't know that system either. I spent a lot of time, when I was going door to door, doing civic lessons with people in my riding about who they were able to vote for. Many people thought they were voting for the prime minister.

I think we make a lot of assumptions about the system we have now. We assume that somehow it's operating really well because people know it really well. I'm just asking whether you think that may or may not be the case. They might be thinking they're getting something out of it that they are not.

Prof. Lee Ward: I think that's a very good point. I'm not sure the public is as invested in the current system as we sometimes think they are. There may be a natural and kind of healthy reluctance to change without understanding the full ramifications of the change, but for Canadians generally—and as a political scientist, I say this with a sad heart—I think we do need a civics lesson as a people, and we need to take our institutions more seriously.

One of the things I find when students ask me whether it matters if they vote is that the sad truth in many cases is that your vote really doesn't matter as an individual, unless you're in a highly competitive riding, in which case your vote really matters.

As you know, we had some very close races in Saskatchewan in the last election. I live in Regina—Lewvan, which had one of the closest in the country, and maybe the closest. My students were electrified by that race in Regina—Lewvan. In the other parts of Regina, they knew so-and-so was going to win, but wow, this was quite something. Not only that, but there was a kind of calculation that kicked in when people starting thinking strategically and started asking me questions. I said that I couldn't tell them how to vote, but I could tell them how to find out about the issues they care about. I saw a much greater engagement. The data is there to show that when you have closer contests, you will get greater turnout.

As a general principle, I think, one effect of the greater PR system is that it would take away the sense that your territorial location will determine your significance as a citizen voting in an election, the sense that by simply being a Canadian citizen voting in an election, you will have contributed in some way to the formation of our Parliament in a meaningful way, not just negatively.

There's a very abstract sense that the general will is all of us. Mechanically, it's almost impossible to do that, and I understand that we're going to have thresholds and there are going to be areas of traditional strength for different parties, but if we can diminish that as much as we can mechanically, I think you will find a greater spirit and engagement.

Even from the sense that the losing candidate in my riding put up a good show, I think people got a sense that now this was beyond just symbolism and that it would actually be in some way represented in Parliament. I'm absolutely convinced—and the data is very clear—that the country should have a form of proportionality built into the system. The turnout is higher.

There are other things, too, such as the question of mandatory voting. They're all really interesting questions and important ones, but I think even such a simple thing as introducing a significant amount of proportionality will increase turnout. So too, perhaps, would greater choice, so maybe we could even just have multiple choices on the ballot, but again, I think there's the sense that you're still getting winners and losers.

● (1945)

Ms. Sheri Benson: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Maguire is next.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the members for making their presentations this evening.

Mr. Ward, I was interested in your comment that we should take our institutions more seriously. I agree. I think it's a very serious decision for Canadians to look at the mechanism of how they elect us, in this case, or other people too—not just members of Parliament, but provincial members as well. I won't go to school boards and municipal elections, because sometimes they're elected with less than 20% of the vote, so that's not good either. Don't get me wrong.

You made a comment earlier that was of interest to me. You said that you wouldn't drive a car without a test drive, yet you say we should have a vote after two elections have gone by.

Prof. Lee Ward: That would be the test run.

Mr. Larry Maguire: That's eight years and two elections down the road. Why would you not have a democratic process to allow people to make the decision on how they want to vote and how they want to do that?

Prof. Lee Ward: You haven't gotten the car yet. You haven't hit the road with it. You're just looking at it in the showroom.

Mr. Larry Maguire: No. In your analogy, you basically put the test drive way behind the decision to make the change, so you've gone ahead and gone through all of the expense and the process without a definition of the people having a say in how that process should work. I'm not going to say to pick one way or the other; I'm just saying that you've taken away the right for the people to have a choice in how that decision should be made for two elections.

Prof. Lee Ward: I would respectfully disagree. I think the parties ran with electoral reform as part of their platform. The majority of Canadians voted for those parties. To me, it crosses the level of legitimacy. The reason I support the referendum is for good government, so that in fact people have had a chance to compare the two systems.

I wish we had more examples of PR at the provincial level so that we could see laboratories of democracy and you could say, “Well, they tried it here, and this is how it works”, and we could have better models. We have no modelling. We've had the same system practically unchanged for 200 years, so I don't think we're getting a fair kind of comparison. If you are going to compare, it should be apples with apples, so I think there should be some period of experimentation.

I don't want to suggest that we would use that two-election cycle as an opportunity to entrench and absolutely enforce a certain way of thinking. It would still be understood to be an experimental period. It would be a chance for people to test it to see if they like it, to see if it's the kind of thing that would reflect their values. I don't know that asking the question up front without the experiential aspect will get a fair result. I don't think you would get a fair result that way.

● (1950)

Mr. Larry Maguire: But you just said you think it's okay to experiment with the Canadian government for two terms.

Prof. Lee Ward: Yes, exactly, and then you have a chance to correct, to reverse, or to alter. At the end of the two terms or the two election cycles—it wouldn't have to be six years and could be less, I guess—you could have multiple questions then too. You could have go back to first past the post, keep MMP, or have some form of single transferable ballot. Democracy is about choice as well.

The Chair: Is that your time, then?

Go ahead, Mr. DeCourcey.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to both presenters for wonderful presentations this evening.

Professor Ward, I enjoyed reading your brief earlier today with the philosophical underpinnings that led to a lot of questions, which you answered in your presentation, about the specifics of what your favourite mixed member proportional system would look like.

I've been trying to think of a question. Something I've been thinking about lately is building a sense of empathy throughout this process for the way different people approach this question. A lot of our witnesses who have preferred a proportional representation system cite wanting their vote to count or cite voters wanting their vote to count as the reason for that preference. I accept that as a premise under which they propose proportional representation. I have also spoken to people on the street in my riding who will say, "I go to the ballot box and I vote all the time. Sometimes I win and sometimes I lose. I'm okay with that; that's democracy."

How do we reconcile those two opposing views and the shades of views in there, and how do we explain the view of those who feel that their vote doesn't count to someone who says they are okay with the current system?

Prof. Lee Ward: That's a very good question. I think it gets to our idea of citizenship and what we share as a community, and whether, even if I win the election, I care about those who don't feel they have won.

In democracy, the pendulum swings back and forth. We won't always be on the winning side. We would hope that the winning side would show the same kind of concern for our rights and our feelings that we would show if we were on the winning side, but I think that historically the sense of winning and losing an election is not the same as alienation and a feeling of disempowerment. My concern is that in many respects, we've reached that level in Canada. It's not simply "Aw, shucks. Next time we'll get you back."

There are areas of our society, segments of our society, that don't buy in to the electoral system because they don't feel that the marginal voices have any kind of proper venue and platform. It's not simply a matter of good intentions or motivations. Even for highly motivated public-spirited people, the structure has developed in a certain way that creates choke points for access to the media, access to politicians, access to the academy. The answer to the example about the universities is that we have to be absolutely conscious of the fact that we're not doing everything we think we should be doing. Everything isn't going great. That there all kinds of marginalized groups and concerns that aren't being taken seriously simply because we don't consider them part of the spectrum.

When you speak of it in those terms and you bring out the sense of fairness, which is such a basic human principle, then I think you'll find that even people who are happy with the current system would be willing and open to change. There are people who really care that much that their voices aren't being heard.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Let me dig at that a little bit.

If we can get those people to accept the potential for change, do we have the legitimacy as parliamentarians to vote and enact that change, or should we ask those people to validate that change in the form of a plebiscite or referendum?

Prof. Lee Ward: In answer to Mr. Maguire's question, I think at some stage we do, but to me, the timing is crucial. I think we actually need to have the experience of the new system to be able to judge it fairly. As such, I am a pro-referendum guy. I think there are a lot of constitutional questions in Canada that I think we could answer better with a referendum. We changed the succession rules to the British monarchy without going to the Canadian people on that. I would have loved to have seen a referendum on that one, but these things happen.

We have to be able to compare apples with apples. I think your concern is that there will be a permanent opposition in the country to this system, even if it's a minority group who feels that the rules have been changed unfairly. That is the concern.

● (1955)

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: I think there is a concern there, but I think there are people who may be willing to accept the change; they just want their voice to be expressed in the delivery of that change. I'm not sure exactly what the number is, but anecdotally, I'm hearing some of that.

Thank you for your view on this aspect.

Prof. Lee Ward: Absolutely. If one political party, for whatever reason, did not go with the changes but campaigned on the problems of the new system, it would be healthy to see the results of that approach. We'll see what the Canadian people say when they have their chance to speak.

The Chair: Those were excellent presentations. I was struck by the clarity of both presentations. I think that enhanced our understanding of a lot of issues surrounding ranked ballot and mixed member proportional.

Thank you so much for being here in the evening to share your perspectives with us.

We now have an open mike session for those who are in the audience.

The way the open mike session works is each intervenor will have two minutes. At 90 seconds, I'll put my hand up. It doesn't mean you have to stop; it just means you have about 30 seconds left. It worked well this afternoon.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Chair, may I suggest a 30-second break to stand in our seats and stretch?

The Chair: We'll have a little break for about a minute or two.

Thank you.

● (1955)

(Pause)

● (2000)

The Chair: We'll resume with our open mike, and we'll proceed as we did this afternoon.

Each intervenor will get two minutes. At 90 seconds, I'll put up my hand as an indication that time is running out. We have two microphones, number one and number two. I'll call up the first person to mike number one and I will call up the second person at the same time. He or she will go to mike number two. We'll start with number one, and when number one is done, I'll call up another person to go to number one and wait to make a comment.

We'll begin, for two minutes, with Mr. Carl Cherland. I'd like Nancy Carswell to take number two while she's waiting for her turn.

Thank you.

● (2005)

Mr. Carl Cherland (As an Individual): I'd like to thank Professor Ward for his clarity, his eloquence, and the information he provided. It totally blew what I had to say out of the water, so I affirm, I confirm, and I hope his ideas will prevail upon you all, or upon most of you.

I appreciate greatly the five guiding principles that make up the foundation of our Canadian electoral reform process. I have particular interest in restoring the effectiveness and legitimacy of voting by strengthening the link between each voter's intention and the electoral result. Consequently, I think proportional representation, whereby 30% of the vote gets 30% of the seats, would benefit us all.

On voter equality, every voter should be able to elect an MP who reflects his or her values.

On diversity, our Parliament should reflect our diversity in Canada, including the political diversity within each region.

On collaboration, proportional representation means parties working together—oh, my goodness—and policies supported by parties representing a majority of voters.

Consequently, I support the promise and the platforms made by three parties that 2015 was the last election under the first-past-the-post system and that every vote will count in 2019. There was a clear, strong majority of voters for these three parties. I do not believe we need an extra referendum. That was a referendum, in a sense. I expect the government to stick to its promised timeline and I look forward to the committee delivering a recommendation for a new electoral system in its final report in December.

I support a mixed member proportional system. I think anything less is a failure to grow as a democracy, a failure to change—which is what maturing is all about—and a failure to mature as a country seeking to be a democracy.

The Chair: Thank you for that eloquent statement.

Before we go to Ms. Carswell, I will ask David Sabine to take mike number one.

Ms. Carswell, you have two minutes.

Ms. Nancy Carswell (As an Individual): Thank you.

Can you hear me fine?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Nancy Carswell: Dear electoral reform committee, your mandate and my vision need proportional representation, which makes this the most important two minutes in my life.

I've had fierce conversations about why civilizations rise and fall. Author Chris Harmon says that civilizations rise when citizens "remould society around the values of solidarity, mutual support, egalitarianism, collective cooperation and a democratically planned use of resources." Civilizations fall when citizens fail to maintain these values.

Let's focus on the value of the democratically planned use of resources. As an environmentalist, I was frustrated when a wage slave would step in between me and the tree I wanted to hug. Then I realized that the tree would not need hugging if the wage slave's owners were not free to undemocratically use that resource in ways that externalized costs on the poor and the environment, and then use the profit to amplify their voice in government.

As citizens, the best way we can maintain our values is if our voices are proportionally represented in government. Give Canadians the opportunity to remould society around our values. On December 1, identify proportional representation as the one electoral reform that offers effectiveness and legitimacy, engagement, accessibility and inclusiveness, integrity, and Canadian-made local representation.

Thank you.

● (2010)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Before David Sabine takes the mike, I would ask Randall Lebell to take mike two.

Go ahead, Mr. Sabine.

Mr. David Sabine (As an Individual): Thank you, all. I currently live in Toronto. Thank you for convening here in Regina. It so happens I'm here on business. I grew up here in the Prairies. I've lived in many different places throughout Canada and throughout North America. I think of myself as having a great perspective on Canada and what it means to be Canadian, having lived in other countries.

Now, there's a page at Wikipedia, arguably one of the greatest artifacts ever produced by the commons in the world, which I think is very appropriate to this particular situation. The page is not well known except to those who actively participate in the ongoing creation of the encyclopedia. The page reads as follows:

> Be bold
>
> [This] can be explained in three words: "Go for it". The Wikipedia community encourages users to be bold when updating the encyclopedia. [Resources] like ours develop faster when everybody helps to fix problems, correct grammar, add facts, make sure wording is accurate, etc. We would like everyone to be bold and help make Wikipedia a better encyclopedia....Wikipedia not only allows you to add, revise, and edit articles: it wants you to do it. This does require a certain amount of politeness, but it works. You'll see. Of course, others here will edit what you write. Do not take it personally! They, like all of us, just wish to make Wikipedia as good an encyclopedia as it can possibly be.

"Instead of getting upset," it continues, just "assume good faith", assume "civility, and be bold again".

So I'm here with I think a message from many Canadians: Go for it. Be bold. Canadians have proven to be very capable of adapting and succeeding easily in light of change. Not only are we capable of electoral reform, we want it. Normally we are very cautious and polite, but we would like you all to be bold and help make Canada a better Canada. This—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. David Sabine: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I would ask Mr. Shane Simpson to take mike number one.

Mr. Lebell, please provide us with your comments.

Mr. Randall Lebell (As an Individual): Thank you all very much for taking most of the points that I had written down prior to coming here, but I do have a few left.

I want to make a statement regarding environmental issues. In an era when we face global environmental challenges, we need the most representative, resilient, and dynamic democracy we can muster, so some form of PR is clearly a better system than what we now have, as it fosters a government that is more representative of the people's choices. I believe it will ensure a government that is more accountable, transparent, and responsive to a changing world environment.

Here in Saskatchewan, we have taken the resource sector assault on our chins and we're suffering from a lack of serious regulation. There has been a lot of deregulation on waterways and in the oil sector, and we've got fracking all over the place. We have nuclear industry in the north and deforestation, and oil is affecting many waterways. I think we'll be held accountable for that through interprovincial waterways regulations, and I think that's an important thing to keep in mind.

That's about all I have to say. Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear.

● (2015)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

If Mr. Dastageer Sakhizai could take mike number two, we'll listen first to Mr. Shane Simpson.

Mr. Shane Simpson (As an individual): Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak.

As a business owner and a landowner in Saskatchewan, I am very concerned when a hearing of such importance is held in Saskatchewan in the middle of harvest time when the majority of Saskatchewan farmers and ranchers are in their fields trying to bring in their crops or hay, etc., before another Saskatchewan winter.

When a new government promises a deficit of $10 billion in its first three years and actually spends $30 billion or $30,000 million in its first nine months and then wants to change the way Canadian elections are done, it makes me very concerned.

It is unbelievably arrogant and dangerous to our Canadian democracy when a new government that is already failing on its fiscal promises to Canadians says it now wants to change the way Canadians vote without the consent of the majority of Canadians. I estimate that through a fairly worded referendum, every one of the 26 million people old enough to vote would express their views, and I hope that we have a referendum before something is pushed through without the will of the people.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want Mr. Krozer to take mike number one, and we'll listen to your comments now, Mr. Sakhizai.

Mr. Dastageer Sakhizai (As an individual) : Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity.

I would like to thank Professor Ward for making a compelling case against the current system and for proportional representation, particularly for the MMP system. I strongly support those views.

I will be specific on a couple of things. First, Professor Ward mentioned the word “empowerment”. In my view, empowerment and inclusion are connected. A study was published in 2005, sponsored by the federal government. It established a strong correlation between inclusion and social cohesiveness. While we encourage and celebrate diversity and multiculturalism in our country, ideally we also would like to have a very cohesive society. In my view, any model of proportional representation fits that image, goal, or vision, but MMP is the best.

The other thing I would like to mention is the ranked ballot. As far as I know, it usually benefits centrist parties. In the Canadian context, we see that our country's governance has been monopolized by two parties. I think the ranked system encouraging or benefiting the centrist parties has a very high likelihood of allowing that two-party system to come back.

The Chair: Thank you.

Basically, you think that the ranked ballot distorts things even more.

Mr. Dastageer Sakhizai: Exactly.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

If Maria Rose Lewans, I think it is, could take number two, we'll go now with Mr. Krozer.

Mr. D-Jay Krozer (As an Individual): Hello, my name is D-Jay Krozer. I'm the vice-president of Local 609 Unifor in Saskatoon. Furthermore, I'm a student of economics and political studies at the University of Saskatchewan.

In October 2015, you were given a mandate by the people of Canada. You have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity here, and I have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to convince you to exercise your mandate.

All major political parties, except for the Conservatives, campaigned on reforming our electoral system, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau pledged that 2015 would be the last federal election held on the defunct single-member plurality system, better known as first-past-the-post electoral system.

I ran as an independent in the constituency of Blackstrap in 2006. In 2006, I received a phone call from an irate voter saying, “What the heck are you doing? Don't you realize you're taking votes away from a good candidate?”

The point I want to make is that it was the first time I realized that voters were actually voting strategically in Canada. I had been under the mistaken belief that people voted for candidates they liked and for things they believed in.

I've been working elections for some 40 years now. I do not have a very good track record, but I keep doing it because I believe in Canadian democracy.

I find that Canadian voters are negative voters. We tend more to vote against what we don't like than for what we do like. Because of our first-past-the-post electoral system, politics has become very negative. What used to be the topic of choice around the dinner table has become taboo. Electoral apathy is rampant because people believe their vote doesn't count.

Opponents to proportional representation claim that proportional representation results in unstable minority and coalition governments. However, coalition and minority governments tend to be more co-operative and collaborative. As Germany and other democracies employing proportional representation have shown, they can be very stable and effective.

● (2020)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

If Mr. Petry could take mike number one, we'll listen now to Ms. Lewans.

Ms. Maria Lewans (As an Individual) : I think if you're doing a...sorry.

The Chair: Take your time.

Ms. Maria Rose Lewans: The system....

The Chair: We're doing a good job is what I think you wanted to say.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Maria Lewans: I think it's important to question the role of the government—not just the way the elections are held, but the role that government plays in this world. I mean, our system is broken. We still have poverty. You wouldn't build a house without a good foundation; why would you build a country without making sure you take care of everybody?

At least you must question life and what this world means and what we're doing to it in this petty squabbling, and what it means to exist.

I guess I'm more of an environmentalist. I hate the term “climate change”, because it's debatable. It's a natural occurrence too, but do you want clean air to breathe and clean water to drink?

We should be considering all options, including the complete abolishment of government, or decentralization and shrinking it to a more municipal and localized level.

We have to decide what we really need. Think of Maslow's hierarchy and what we really need as a species. We need food, water, and shelter. There's a certain amount we need in life and a certain amount we don't.

An example, say, is the tax credit for sports. Sports are a healthy part, but kids' sports is a community initiative that we can take care of. Do we need competitive sport, especially with all this research going into concussions and what they do to people and—

The Chair: Do you feel a particular electoral system will be able to decide these issues more effectively?

Ms. Maria Lewans: Yes, even listening to this, I still feel very ignorant as to what exactly.... Sometimes you need an incubation period.

The Chair: Well, of course, and there's information on our committee website. There's a fantastic briefing document prepared by our analysts. It's really important that you came tonight to learn about what we're trying to do here on our cross-country tour, so thank you very much.

Unfortunately, we're at two minutes, but thank you for stepping up.

We'll go to Mr. Petry, but first I'd like Rachel Morgan to take mike number two, please.

Go ahead, Mr. Petry.

● (2025)

Mr. Norman L. Petry (As an Individual): First, I'd like to say I strongly support the adoption of a system of proportional representation for Canada. It is for this reason that I urge the committee to reject any recommendation to adopt a mixed member proportional system, because it's proportional only in name. Although it's called a proportional system, it's a system that is deeply flawed in that it's easily gamed. Let me explain.

If a political party simply divides itself into two parties—one that runs candidates who are likely to win at the constituency level and not candidates on the party list, and another that says it is a regional alliance party and runs all its candidates on the list system—then what ends up happening is that the result is not party proportional.

It's easy to see this. This is not a hypothetical concern. This actually occurs in every place that has adopted the mixed member proportional system. For example, in Venezuela, a party took 57.4% of the parliamentary seats with 48% of the vote. It happened in the Italian election in 2001. It happened in Albania in 2005. In Lesotho, a party took almost 70% of the seats with 51% of the vote. It's a very simple strategy that any party can adopt, because polling is easy.

Additional-member systems work only if every party that wins seats would be entitled to additional votes from the party list, but that is not guaranteed. It's easily possible, say in an assembly of 100 representatives, for a party that gets 20% of the vote overall to get 30% of the seats. In that situation there are no additional members to —

The Chair: I think you're referring to a very complex calculation related to what's called overhang seats. I think this is more or less the territory we're getting into.

Mr. Norman L. Petry: Yes, and you can fix it in two different ways. You can either have a variable assembly, meaning that you would add members to make the proportions work out—in which case you have no idea before the election how many representatives you're going to have or how many seats you're actually going to need in the building—or you can take away actual won seats from the parties that are overrepresented.

The Chair: There are systems that deal with these distortions, I believe, but we take your point that in mixed proportional, you still need to make some kinds of adjustments.

Mr. Norman L. Petry: My concern is that if we adopt a system like this and the parties do game the system—which they will do—as soon as one party does it, all the other parties will have to follow. Then we will not have a system of proportional representation in practice, and as a result people will be very cynical about any future change.

The Chair: That's for sure. I agree that we don't want people to lose faith in the system because it's not properly designed.

Thank you.

Mr. Norman L. Petry: I just want to say finally that I urge the committee to look seriously at adopting the single transferable vote system, which provides a generalized system of proportional representation that is far more powerful and effective than MMP.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Would Dauna Ditson like to take mike one, please?

Go ahead, Ms. Morgan.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Rachel Morgan (As an Individual): Good evening. Thank you for having me.

I would like to ask a question. If we adopted a preferential vote system, how would we make sure that our country did not always elect a centrist party like the Liberal Party?

[*English*]

That is to say, going forward, a party that benefits from being a second choice for everyone could win every time. What sort of systems and fail-safe measures will we have in place to protect the country from that happening all of the time?

That's everything. Thank you.

The Chair: We're still at the exploratory phase. That's a good question to keep in mind. We're just gathering information right now.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your question about preferential voting. We also appreciated the fact that you asked it in French. Thank you very much.

[*English*]

If Frances Simonson could take mike number two, we'll go to Ms. Ditson, please.

● (2030)

Ms. Dauna Ditson (As an Individual): Thank you for the opportunity to speak, and thank you for the important work that you all are doing.

I wanted to speak because I regularly vote for my third-choice party, and I don't think that's fair.

That's all.

The Chair: Point made. Thank you.

If Mr. Rodney Williams could take mike one, we'll go to Ms. Simonson, please.

Ms. Frances Simonson (As an Individual): A few analogies came to mind tonight. I wanted to say how awesome I feel to be here. I was really impressed with what I heard from the presenters and from the thoughtfulness from you guys. Some people might be a little bit hesitant believing that this is real.

Picture yourself in Athens at the birth of democracy. Someone says, "Let's have everybody vote, and everybody's opinion will matter." The answer is "No, it's going to take way too long to count all the hands, and then we're going to have to pay somebody to actually count them. They'll have to be an employee. Yeah, let's forget about that."

A second analogy comes to mind whenever I think about proportional representation. I think about how people fear this dialogue and this co-operation that's going to go on in the House of Commons. Then I think how if either I or my husband was the one who made all the decisions in my house, it would end either in divorce or in extreme depression of one of the parties.

This is something we cannot fear. This is natural. Dialogue is natural. Speaking to everybody who has an existence in Canada is natural and it's right. When we talk about proportional representation compared to different things, I think STV sounds like a very tiny band-aid, and proportional representation sounds like what we're really looking for, what Canadians really want, because it's the right thing to do.

One of the reasons that it's the right thing to do is because of minorities. I don't know if that's been brought up to you yet or not. In New Zealand, for example, the Maori people have a place in the House of Representatives, a voice, a platform to speak from. They might not be able to pass a vote all on their own, but how many of you have had experiences with an aboriginal person coming to you and telling you something about their culture that you had no idea about before that? You couldn't believe you had never thought of it, and it was actually compatible with a bunch of things that your party thinks.

That was my experience in 2015 when we had the national election. I discovered that it was actually on principle that some aboriginal people don't vote. The idea is that we don't want them voting in our elections, so we're not going to vote in theirs. We're not citizens of Canada; they made a treaty with us.

Then we think, "What? I thought you thought you were a citizen of Canada."

This is just mind-boggling. We can't just continue to have them sitting at round tables all the time. Our government goes and meets them at the round table, but they should actually be in our government.

The Chair: So the point you're making is that PR or mixed member proportional is more inclusive of all segments.

Ms. Frances Simonson: You could imagine that there would be a party that would champion their ideas, and they could vote for that party with the knowledge that a few of them would get in and at least speak for them.

I spent a lot of my young life feeling completely alienated. All I wanted was for some environmental things to be talked about on TV. I thought this wasn't a country for me. I turned off the TV until finally there was a little bit of action.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

If Mr. William Clary could take mike number two, we'll now listen to Mr. Rodney Williams.

Mr. Rodney Williams (As an Individual): I'd like to thank the committee for coming to Regina and hearing our voices.

My name is Rod Williams. I am from Regina. I work at EVRAZ steel and pipe, and pipelines are safe. I also have a lot of friends who wanted to be here, but they are on shift. I also have friends and family who are right now on their combines harvesting, bringing in the canola, the wheat, the durum, the barley, and the hay.

As I said, I appreciate coming here, and please let it be known that a lot of them would be here, but this is also their time to make their money.

I'm a proud Canadian, as are all of you. I am a Conservative member and I'm a supporter. I value all of your opinions and your views. I have learned a lot coming here tonight, and I have learned a lot at Erin Weir's town hall meeting back on September 6, I believe.

My view on electoral reform is that you have to let the people decide this. That's what you take back to the House of Commons. According to a recent poll in *The Globe and Mail*, 73% of Canadians prefer a referendum. I heard the term “deliver empowerment” here tonight. Okay, let the people study this, and then have a referendum to decide it.

I value what the leader of the Green Party, Ms. May, said here tonight about stampeding support for parties for whatever the reason. I do appreciate where you're coming from on that.

In closing, no matter where you stand on this issue, you all should put your trust in Canadians and your supporters and let the people decide. Whether it's in the coffee shop or at a sporting event or wherever, one constant I hear all the time—and it doesn't matter what political hat you may wear—is “It doesn't matter what we think anyhow.” Well, let's reverse this. It does matter. It is imperative that Canadians have a say. Do you know why it's imperative? If you want this to be successful, it's best that you let the people decide now, not later. If you want change, let's validate the change.

Thank you.

● (2035)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Finally, We have Mr. Clary.

Mr. William Clary (As an Individual): Unlike those folks who support first past the post, I believe in the people of Canada and their ability to make intelligent decisions when they're well informed.

That said, what's also important is that we have to deal with two very strong emotions when we come to these questions of elections, fear and love. I believe that first past the post represents a system that enhances the use of fear, and I don't think we have to look very far in terms of our own elections or the American elections to see how much fear is utilized in order to force people to vote in a particular direction.

In terms of the previous folks, I only caught a portion of what they said, but I like the idea that Russ Husum mentioned: you get to choose your conscience, you get to choose what you love as your first choice. Then you can rank your ballot, if you want to avoid someone who is particularly scary, to reflect your support, but at least you get a chance to vote your conscience.

Like Lee, I was in Lewvan, and I felt obliged to vote for the NDP when I wanted to vote for Green, so I wasn't able to say that I supported the ideas of the Greens. I felt that the Greens had a message that reflected the concerns that we should have in this nation, but in the current conditions I felt obliged not to allow a Conservative member to get into power, so I didn't vote my conscience, and that hurt me.

I think we have an opportunity here to make a substantial change whereby people can be encouraged to vote their conscience and what they love, as opposed to being scared into voting for a particular party.

I thank you for the work you're doing.

The Chair: Thank you.

That concludes our open-mike segment and our day of hearings. It's been wonderful to be in Regina and Saskatchewan. We took away a lot from both the open-mike session and the witnesses who appeared today.

Tomorrow we're off to Winnipeg. For the members, we'll be leaving the lobby by taxi at 7:10 tomorrow morning.

Thank you to all of you who came tonight and showed real interest and made thoughtful commentary on this issue.

Thank you, members. We'll see you in a few hours.

The meeting is adjourned.